

# BALZAC



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B A L Z A C

Translated, with Notes, by  
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# B A L Z A C

BY

LÉMILE FAGUET

OF THE ACADEMIE FRANÇAISE

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# B A L Z A C

## I

### HIS LIFE

HONORÉ BALZAC, who subsequently assumed the name of Honoré *de* Balzac, was born at Tours on the 16th of May (Saint Honoré's Day) 1799. His father, François Balssa, had very early changed his name to Balzac ; he was born at Nougaïrie, in the *département* of the Tarn, in 1746. Honoré's grandfather went by the name of Balssa, and farmed land in the parish of Nougaïrie ; his mother's name was Laure Sallambier, and she was born at Paris in 1778. This duality of strain in Balzac's progenitors frees the biographer from any need to go into the question of ethnology. Balzac was not the product of Touraine, nor of Languedoc, nor of Paris ; he was merely of the French breed.

His father was vigorous, full-blooded, a great talker and reader, a man of startling projects

and ideas (traits of character which are again to be met with in his son); in later life hardly caring for anything save how to prolong his days so that he might at least rival Fontenelle.<sup>1</sup> Honoré de Balzac has bestowed many of his father's characteristics on Doctor Bénassi, in the *Médecin de Campagne*.

M. Balzac, the elder, had been, under the former régime, a lawyer of the humbler sort and very obscure. The Revolution doubtlessly brought him the shoulder-tap to higher dignity, for we find him, in 1793, figuring in the *Almanach National* as municipal official and member of the general council of the Commune. He was then sent to the frontier of the *Nord* as director of supplies. In 1797 he married Laure Sallambier, whose father belonged to the same governmental board. From 1804 to 1811 he was master of the workhouse at Tours. From 1798 onward he had been occupied in the direction of the almshouses at Tours, and in this town Honoré was born, and the *mot du temps* culled by Taine—'It's a fine hospital mushroom'—was probably, while

<sup>1</sup> Fontenelle was a nephew of Corneille. He wrote popular scientific works of great worth, and died a centenarian in 1757.  
—TR.

being at the same time an attempt at defining his literary temperament, an allusion to his place of origin. Balzac's father was, over and above his administrative duties, second deputy to the mayor of the township of Tours. In 1814 he re-entered at Paris the department of supplies which had first occupied him as director, and stayed there until his retirement in 1819, when he went to live at Villeparisis, and later on at Versailles. He was to live on until 1829, when he passed away at the age of eighty-three years at Versailles.

Honoré's mother, thirty-two years younger than her husband and twenty-one years older than her son, was a highly intelligent woman, very witty, very pretty, with beautiful eyes, a long thin nose, a thin and rather tight lipped mouth ; dry, masterful, and overbearing, her hobby being occult science and the daringly metaphysical authors, a bent which she handed on at one time to her son. She was to outlive Honoré by some years ; she died, in 1853, at seventy-five years of age. It is generally believed that Balzac put his mother's least pleasing traits into his portrait of *la Cousine Bette*.

Honoré, the eldest of the children, had two

sisters and a brother. The elder of his sisters, Laure, two years younger than Honoré, was the best friend that he ever had on this earth, his confidante and good counsellor; and she has left behind for us some infinitely interesting memoirs. She became the wife of M. Surville. The second, Laurence, married M. de Montzaigle and died quite young in 1826. His brother, after a scapegrace boyhood and youth, emigrated to America, where he led a life of hardship and died while still comparatively young. Honoré's first school was the lycée of Tours which he attended for some time as a day scholar, and a page dealing with this experience is to be found in his *Lys dans la Vallée*; then—though for what reason I have been unable to discover—he was sent to the College of Vendôme in 1807, he being then nine years old. The College of Vendôme, very famous for other reasons at this time, was under the direction of the Oratorians.<sup>1</sup> They were severe. Honoré did not take at all kindly to study properly so called; but he read enormously everything on which he could lay his hands, and everything that he could smuggle out of the library. He was looked upon as a deplor-

<sup>1</sup> A religious order formerly much occupied in teaching.—TR.

able pupil and passed much of his time in detention. He wrote also, as the whim prompted him, all manner of things, on subjects generally far beyond a boy of his years. Later on in life he gave some account of his college days in *Louis Lambert*. The outcome of all this was a kind of brain fever which caused much alarm. His mother was summoned. She found him pale, thin, unsettled, and to all appearance in a stupor. His grandmother cried out, 'That's how the college gives them back to us.' He was taken away. This was on the 22nd of August 1813, he being then fifteen.

His health mended rapidly and he entered, as day scholar, the third class of the lycée of Tours. In 1814, his father having been appointed, as before mentioned, director of the first division for town supplies at Paris, Honoré was sent to the institution Lepître (for which see also *le Lys dans la Vallée*) in the Marais. M. Lepître picked out the young Honoré, befriended him, and acquired rather a strong influence over the lad. M. Lepître, who had risked his life for the royal family during the Terror, was a strong Catholic and monarchist. It is quite possible that his ideas may have

roused an answering echo in the young man's mind.

His studies, never in fact other than badly done, having come to an end, Honoré entered a lawyer's office, that of M. Guyonnet-Merville. From seventeen to twenty, very active, he was taken up with legal procedure, studied law, and regularly attended the classes at the Faculty of Letters. He was a very needy student, the very type of the poor scholar, for his father made him no allowance whatever. Balzac has set that down very carefully in *la Peau de Chagrin*.

At twenty or twenty-one his father made him a dazzling offer, a lawyer to whom M. François Balzac had once done a good turn offering to make Honoré his confidential clerk right away, and then, after a short term of probation, his successor, on the very easiest of terms. But Honoré fought shy of the lawyer ; ever since his college days, and especially after the classes at the Sorbonne, he had nursed literary ambitions which he could no longer hold in check. Terrible domestic upheavals followed on his refusal. Honoré was obstinate, and his mother inflexible. His father was less so. He decided to put the young man to the

test. For two years Honoré lived alone, with an allowance just sufficient to meet his bare needs, and tried his luck at literature. For a writer two years of probation is a ridiculously short period, but such was the paternal decision. During this time and thereafter, M. François Balzac having just been pensioned off, the family was living at Villeparisis.

Honoré, in an attic in the Rue Lesdiguières, near the Arsenal, worked furiously for two years. He has described with hardly a word of hyperbole what a terrible life he then led in the *Peau de Chagrin* and in *Albert Savarus*. His determination was unflinching. He wrote to his sister Laure, ‘With an assured income of 1500 francs, I might work for fame ; but time is needed for such an undertaking, and first of all I must settle how to make a living. All the same I shall not become a lawyer. Look on me as dead if ever I am snuffed out under a lawyer’s wig. I would rather be a dray-horse that goes its thirty or forty rounds in an hour, drinks, eats, and sleeps at set times. And this mechanical rotation is called life, this incessant round ! Laure, Laure, my only two wishes and how immense they are !—*to be famous, and to be loved*, will they ever be fulfilled ? ’

He brought forth a tragedy which he read to a committee of friends, among whom was that M. Survile who was to become his sister's husband. Disapproval was unanimous. Choice of a new umpire, the elder M. Survile, a former professor, according to some, or the poet Andrieux as others say, resulted in a like disapproval of even greater severity. What did Honoré conclude ? That he ' had no gift for tragedy,' and set to work again.

However, as he broke down from overwork, his relenting parents withdrew him to Villeparisis. He worked on there, although less at ease and deprived of the solitude which his work required, and there he made the acquaintance of Mme. de Berny. Mme. de Berny, the daughter of a German musician and instrumentalist to Marie Antoinette by one of her chambermaids, was born at Versailles in 1777. She was thus forty-five years old in 1822, and Honoré's senior by twenty-one years. She had been married at fifteen to Gabriel de Berny, who became an advisory judge at the Royal Court at Paris, and had borne him eight children; but she did not love her husband, who was morose and peevish. She became first Honoré's friend and then

his mistress, her friendship for him outlasting her life.

She fostered in him those Catholic and monarchical feelings which it seems quite likely that he had already conceived ; she kept alive his interest in the bygone court ; she gave him that liking for aristocratic elegance which he always retained in spite of his temperament driving him in quite other directions ; she urged him on to write ; she urged him on still more perhaps to try his hand in business, and it seems to me that there is a good deal of likeness between Mme. de Berny and Mme. de Warens. In any case, Balzac loved her whole-heartedly. He has said somewhere, obviously thinking of her, ‘ A man’s first love should be a woman’s last ’ ; and his works often show us quite young men falling in love with women already well on in life : Rubempré and Mme. de Bargeton, Gaston de Nueil and Mme. de Beauséant, etc. This kind of love in a man points to a certain innate indelicacy which it develops.

Balzac took to novel-writing, and particularly (like Rubempré) to novel-writing of the Scott kind. He sought a publisher, and found him, young, intelligent, and enterprising, in the person of Le Poitivin, whom he had probably

known in Paris during his period of literary apprenticeship. Le Poitivin published him and paid him. Balzac brought out in rapid succession seven novels very hastily put together, which, even on his own showing, were quite worthless ; but he felt the oncoming of ideas ; he felt himself ripening, and wrote to his sister, 'A little longer, and between the me of to-day and the me of to-morrow there will be the difference that exists between the youth of twenty and the man of thirty years. I reflect ; my ideas gather strength ; I see that nature has not been niggardly with me in the matter of heart and head.' Every one has told himself as much ; but here there was no mistake about it.

However he believed that, dallying in this way, he was spending himself without earning enough to live on, and he begot either from his own unfortunate whim or that of Mme. de Berny the notion of launching out into business, so that, having made his pile quickly, he might thereafter settle down to a life of artistry wholly tranquil and secure. He quickly turned publisher with the small capital that he was able to get together, and especially with what was forthcoming from Mme. de Berny. He

failed completely in this first attempt and got into debt. In order to run down his money he set out on another undertaking with a new partner and came out of it with as little success. In order to extricate himself, he set up, along with a certain Laurent and Mme. de Berny, a foundry for casting printer's type. The outcome was equally disastrous. In order to save her son from bankruptcy, Mme. Balzac sacrificed her whole fortune; but he was still burdened with a heavy debt, for what amount has not, I believe, ever been known, and this he dragged after him until the end of his days.

He once more set to work as a writer with the fury of despair. This was in 1829, the year of his father's death. Not for the sake of rest, but in order that he might live in purer air, and in a house of ampler room and among new surroundings, Balzac accepted at Fougères the hospitality of M. de Pomereul, who had formerly been under great obligation to his guest's father, and there he studied Brittany and the Bretons. Hence his first book worthy, and truly worthy, of attention, *les Chouans*, the result of long pondering, and written carefully and slowly.

He then went back to the home which was

now at Versailles, and thus, hard by Paris, he tried to get on to good terms with those in the best society and in the literary world. Mme. de Berny helped him in this. She had kept on good terms with Sophie Gay,<sup>1</sup> whose acquaintance he made, as well as that of her daughter Delphine, already famous, and later to become still more so under the name of Mme. de Girardin. He witnessed, too, the opening of Mme. de Bagration's salon-door to welcome him. In spite of his bulkiness, which was becoming marked, his ill manners, the complete ignorance of how to dress well which always marked him, and his lack of wit, he was liked on account of his good nature, his gaiety, his frankness, and—why not say so, since it is a weakness of which salons stand in need?—his volubility.

Among literary people he knew Henri Monnier, La Touche, and George Sand (the last-named, deeply interested by *les Chouans* and *la Physiologie du Mariage*, first paying him a visit without any preliminary formality), the

<sup>1</sup> She wrote interesting novels now chiefly noteworthy as sidelights on the Directoire and the Empire, and died in 1852, three years before her daughter Delphine. The latter became the wife of a well-known pamphleteer, and wrote light verses and comedies of worth.—TR.

Duchess d'Abrantès (Mme. Junot), who, under the Empire, had been one of the most beautiful, most brilliant, and most royally prodigal of Parisian women, and who, in 1830, was living wretchedly on the slender earnings of a feeble but indefatigable pen. We can fancy how, next to her father himself, who had seen at such close range the military world of the Empire, Mme. d'Abrantès was of use to him in bringing back to life before his gaze the various personages, with their might and their meanness, their greatness and their weakness, as they lived during the heroic period of the first Napoleon.

In 1831 he got to know Mme. la Duchesse de Castries in circumstances which were with Balzac of rather frequent occurrence, as they are, it should be added, with most men of letters. The Duchess wrote to him anonymously (as she did to Sainte-Beuve after the publication of *Volupté*) ; he replied ; a correspondence was set going, and the Duchess ended by lifting her mask and begging the writer to come and see her. The Duchess de Castries seems to have been venturesome, of highly extravagant whims, coquettish, and, in short, disposed to love no one ardently except her

own self. Balzac was greatly taken with her. For her sake he became quite a society man during the years 1831 and 1832 ; for her sake he gave more and more parade to those Catholic and legitimist sentiments which had indeed always been his ; for her sake his debts swelled rather than shrank ; perhaps it was for her sake also that he offered himself as a candidate to the electoral committee of several wards, and failed in all of them. In obedience to a summons from Mme. de Castries he joined her at Aix-les-Bains, where he remained for some weeks, and a plan having been arranged for travelling in Italy, he set out with the lady, her husband, and the Duke of Fitz-James, but only accompanied them as far as Geneva, where some kind of a quarrel put an end both to the trip and to his relations with the Duchess, and brought about his return to Paris. When the Duchess herself returned to town, nothing further was required of Balzac, for the sake of due seemliness, than to put in a few polite appearances at the de Castries' drawing-room. We may be sure that the *Duchesse de Langeois* of Balzac's work derives from the Duchess de Castries.

1832 saw the beginning—epistolary at start-

ing, but later on of a more material kind—of Balzac's connection with Mme. Hanska, since his first known letter to this lady dates from the first month of the following year. Mme. Hanska, *née* Rezvuszka, was a young Polish woman of the bluest blood and very wealthy, a great lover of French literature, and much taken with Balzac's novels. Like Mme. de Castries and several others, she wrote to Balzac, and first of all a friendly correspondence, and then an amorous friendship sprang up between them.

From 1833 to 1837 (and later, but especially during these four years) Balzac made many prolonged stays in the provinces, in Angoumois, Touraine, Berri (Issoudan), Brittany (Guérande), Limousin, Auvergne, Savoy, Dauphiny, and Provence. He was fond of provincial France as a country where types and characters remained whole without being blunted or worn thin by continual friction, as is the case in the larger towns. The outcome of these journeys and long stays in small towns was the famous series of novels classed together under the general title of *Scènes de la Vie de Province*.

Towards 1833 his mother, being more than ever taken up with occult science, lured him

after her along the same track, and hence he came to deal with man's communication with the beyond, and with the power of magnetism as shown in *Ursule Mirouet* and *Séraphita*. It should be added that no period was more crazy after occultism and all its kindred than that of Louis Philippe : the subject may be fruitfully studied in the *Hiérophantes* of M. Fabre des Essarts.

In the spring of the same year Balzac first met Mme. Hanska, who had come with her husband to Neuchâtel, where Balzac joined her. He saw her seldom and always in company, but these short glimpses inspired him with a deep passion which continued growing almost up to the day of his death. At the end of December he went back to Switzerland, M. and Mme. Hanska having settled down at Geneva for some time, and there he stayed for six weeks, enjoying her hospitality, or at least seeing her a good deal. He returned to Paris at the beginning of February 1834.

In 1835 Mme. de Berny got a judicial separation from her husband, our only cause for surprise being that she had not done so sooner, without casting any special blame, we may add, on Balzac, with whom she had now very few

dealings. In 1836 she died at la Boulonnière, near Nemours, at the age of fifty-eight years. In spite of his new passions, her death was a heavy blow for Balzac. He often said that she was the only woman that he had ever loved. It seems to me that it would be fairer to say that she was the only woman who had truly loved him.

In the midst of the romances which he was writing and the romances of real life which he was beginning or just leaving behind him, the business dealings at which he was once more trying his hand, Balzac turned his thoughts toward the drama and journalism. In 1839 he submitted *l'Ecole des Ménages* to the management of the *Renaissance*, by whom it was refused. In 1840 he started the *Revue Parisienne*, in which he was very hard on Sainte-Beuve, La Touche, Eugène Sue, Thiers, and even Victor Hugo. The *Revue Parisienne*, lacking the sinews of war, survived only three months. In 1840 he brought out *Vautrin* at the Porte-Saint-Martin theatre, and this again, since it was bad, was coldly received, and suppressed after the first performance owing to Frédéric Lemaître having made himself up as Louis Philippe. Balzac attributed his disaster to the

forelock of Frédéric Lemaître, 'a disaster which a barber's tongs might have set right,' and the animosity of the newspaper men. 'Does the author put it down to journalism? If so he can only congratulate it for having thus justified by its conduct all that he said of it elsewhere.' This is an allusion to his portraits of journalists and his pictures of the press world in the *Illusions perdues*.

In 1841, at the Odéon, he produced *les Ressources de Quinola*, not at all a bad piece, which fell completely flat.

During the same year M. Hanska died, and Balzac thought he might now achieve the happy consummation of his sentimental life. But nothing came of it. For reasons which remain hidden from us, in spite of the fact that we may now read the letters of Balzac to Mme. Hanska, the projected marriage was indefinitely postponed.

In 1843 Balzac presented at the Gaiety a gloomy drama entitled *Paméla Giraud*, which once more was a complete failure. The same year Mme. Hanska took up her residence at St. Petersburg, in order to bring out her daughter in Russian society. Balzac went there to see her, stayed as her guest for three months, was

charmed again by the lady and by his first impact with things Russian, and returned to Paris to take up once more his frightful burden of work.

In 1845 Mme. Hanska, having betrothed her daughter to the Count Mniszech, set out for Dresden with them, and was there joined by Balzac, who, ardently enamoured of all three, accompanied them to Marseilles, Geneva, Rome, Naples, and came back to Paris in despair at having to leave them.

In the following March he returned to Italy to see his friends and stayed there some weeks, then coming back to Paris, which he again left in August for Wiesbaden, where Mme. Hanska was then staying, and whence, after a fortnight's visit, he once more returned to the capital.

Towards the close of 1846 Mme. Hanska visited Paris, in order to consult the doctors about her health, which was much shaken, and there she remained for several weeks.

In 1847 Balzac went as far afield as Vierzchownia in Ukraine, in order to visit Mme. Hanska on her estate there. He was once more perfectly happy, made a tour in Southern Russia, admired Kiev, studied the customs of the country, was much interested in the monu-

ments, and once more greatly enjoyed his rôle of tourist and observer. He was back again in Paris at the beginning of 1848.

He brought out there, at last with success, *la Marâtre*, which was played at the Théâtre Historique, and offered to the Théâtre Français and elsewhere his best piece, *Mercadet le Faiseur*, which was only to see the footlights, accompanied by hearty applause, after its author had passed away.

In the month of September he went back to Russia. He was very ill there, his chest becoming diseased, as his heart had already been for a long time. He dragged along for eighteen months, devotedly cared for but unable to get better. Slightly improved in 1850, he doubtlessly begged Mme. Hanska to bestow herself in marriage. She consented ; but for marriage with a foreigner the Emperor's permission was necessary, and this was granted only on condition that Mme. Hanska gave up all her belongings to her children. She agreed to do so on condition that they allowed her an income. She married Balzac on the 14th of March 1850, eighteen years having passed by since the connection had first begun.

No sooner was he married than Balzac again

fell ill, and found it impossible to bring home his wife with him to Paris before the end of May. He was extremely weak. A letter (of which considerable portions were published in the *Intermédiaire des Chercheurs et Curieux* for the 30th of November 1912) was written by Mme. de Balzac on the 9th of May to her daughter, Mme. de Mniszech, the mother being then in a town on the borders of Russia (since she still had Galicia before her), but already within the domain of Austria (since there was a Russian consul there). 'I am at the Hôtel de Russie,' she says. 'Our dear good B., in spite of his painful condition, is running all over the place. Our Russian consul is exceedingly kind to him. He accompanies him everywhere, making everything easy for him. Nothing, neither our chests nor our personal luggage, is to be opened! Think what a frightful loss of time that will save us, and how much annoyance we shall be spared! Don't worry, my dear angel, about the Galician roads, which are both excellent and without risk; we shall moreover travel both day and night. . . . My husband has just come back; he has carried through all his business with admirable speed; we set out to-day. I had no idea what an adorable

creature he is ; after knowing him for seventeen years, I daily discover in him new qualities of which I have been hitherto unconscious. If only he might have his health ! Speak about it, I beg of you, to M. Knoth . You have no idea what he went through last night. I hope that his native air may do him good ; but if this hope should be denied me, I shall deserve your pity, I assure you. It is so good to be thus loved and befriended. There is also something very much the matter with his poor eyes. I don't know what it all means, and I am at times very anxious and downhearted. I hope to send you better news to-morrow, when I will write again. . . . Our good B. . . . kisses your little hands and begs you not to worry, that he will be all right as soon as he touches French soil . . . etc.' At last they reached Paris. Their return was marked by a lugubrious incident : Balzac had made ready for his wife a luxuriously furnished house in the Rue Fortun . Bringing her home in the evening, he found it lit up throughout, but was unable to get in. He was obliged to send for a locksmith, and an entry was at last effected. The servant left in charge of the house had suddenly gone mad some hours before.

After some weeks of comparatively good health, Balzac was once more stricken down and unable to leave his bed. He was devotedly nursed by his mother, Mme. Honoré de Balzac having left his bedside, and perhaps the house, for what reason has never been made clear, though it is thought that since their return to Paris her feelings towards her husband had begun to cool.

Balzac died on the 18th of August 1850. He had a royal funeral. The Minister of the Interior, Victor Hugo, Alexander Dumas, and Sainte-Beuve (the last-named in spite of an old enmity) were his pall-bearers. Victor Hugo pronounced an eloquent discourse at his grave-side.

Balzac was not a member of the French Academy. He had offered himself as a candidate in 1839, while still young for this sort of distinction, but already at the height of his fame ; but he withdrew to make way for Victor Hugo. In 1841 he made further overtures for admission; but again withdrew. In 1847 he came forward to fill the vacant chair of Ballanche and won but two votes in his favour, those of Victor Hugo and M. de Pongerville, as the former has borne witness. In 1849 he

came forward for the two vacancies caused by the deaths of Chateaubriand and Vatout, receiving but two votes on each occasion.

In his earliest years he was small but well-shaped, with a fine forehead, fine chestnut eyes, short curly hair, cheeks and chin rounded, thick and humoursome lips, a short nose rather hard in line with wide and mobile nostrils. Later on, in later youth, he grew stout, with a thick neck, a prominent stomach, and a double chin ; spoiling his looks by letting his hair grow long and leaving it unkempt, with a thick and drooping moustache. He kept always his very fine wide brow, high and rounded, and his fine eyes, not very large, but well-formed and full of sprinkled gold, and his glance sparkling with intelligence, frankness, and curiosity. His manners were awkward, abrupt, and without grace ; his behaviour at once pretentious and easy-going. He was absolutely wanting in all that is known as distinction.

His character was likewise commonplace. He was without moral elegance, without delicacy, I will not go the length of saying without morality, for it is obvious that he was honest in his business dealings, in which he was more sinned against than sinning ; but I should say

quite without any tenderness of conscience. The easy-going way in which he accepted Mme. de Berny's money was not above-board, and it seems very likely that his fidelity to Mme. Hanska was prompted almost as much by the lady's fortune as by her person, however worthy she may otherwise have been of it.

He had that profound egotism—shared alike by almost all artists, but with him quite open and unashamed, and beyond his power either to cloak or to keep under—that consists in looking on everything as insignificant when set beside his own work. One day Jules Sandeau, at that time his secretary, coming home from attending his sister's funeral, Balzac asked kindly after his family, and then, the reply hardly having reached his ears, went on, ‘Come along, that 's enough for that subject, let 's get back to something serious. Old Goriot . . .’ And he never outgrew this kink. One rather important character in his works is Doctor Bianchon. When near his death he said, ‘Fetch Bianchon ; there 's nobody but Bianchon can pull me through.’ He was jealous of his rivals, even sometimes of those that were dead. Sainte-Beuve having published an article on Loysen, whose poetry was

well worth being brought back to light, he wrote, 'The mind of M. Sainte-Beuve is of the bat order. . . . His soft and yielding phrase, cowardly and without sinew, plays round about his subjects ; he prowls in the darkness like a jackal ; he goes into the graveyards, and carries off respectable corpses that have done nothing to the author that he should disturb them in this way, such as the Loysons, the . . .' Balzac was jealous of Loyson, just as Sainte-Beuve was jealous of Chateaubriand.

But he had some qualities that were of quite a high order. Sainte-Beuve said of him, in accusing him of a business transaction which it is now almost certain never took place, 'This mixing up of glory with gain makes me grow weary.' Now, if this be found wearisome, it is the mixing that must be blamed. He was fond of money ; but he also loved fame, and it was never entirely for the one, and it was *always* for the other as well that he laboured. He was fond of telling how when in Russia, a lady's companion, as she brought in the tea, heard her hostess say, 'Ah well ! You say then, M. Balzac . . .' and dropped her tray in her astonishment. 'I know what glory is,' he would add, with real happiness. As a matter

of fact the tray would doubtless have fallen just as promptly for Frédéric Soulié ;<sup>1</sup> but the saying is not therefore the less agreeable and shows the speaker in a kindly light.

Again, he was certainly good, generous, and straightforward. He kept in his service for a long time a secretary, since then become famous, who did nothing whatever, and was wholly undeserving of his indulgence.<sup>2</sup> His disposition was homely and jovial, though it would be better to say that it was *ardent* : he could be wrathful, carried away by frightful fits of temper, and still oftener by grossly vulgar merriment, jocularity, and enormous outbursts of laughter. It was said of Fontenelle, ‘ You have never laughed ! ’ ‘ I have never laughed,’ was his answer ; ‘ that is to say, I have never gone Ha ! Ha ! Ha ! ’ Balzac, on the other hand, never smiled ; but he was uttering his Ha ! Ha ! Ha ! nearly all the time. He belonged to the common stock, both in the good and the evil sense of the term, from his head to his heels.

<sup>1</sup> Frédéric Soulié (1800-47), a pleasant writer with a very loose style and no pretensions to profundity, whose novels are now forgotten.—TR.

<sup>2</sup> This seems to be another reference to Jules Sandeau, George Sand’s first lover, and the author of the classic *Roche aux Mouettes*. —TR.

His aristocratic opinions, as so often happens with political opinions, were in complete contradiction to his temperament. He was of the common folk, and held aristocratic opinions, just as Béranger, on the contrary, wanted to be of the common folk, and succeeded in reaching them, though he had both the temperament and the character of a careful middle-class man, shrewd, skilful, cunning, frugal and fastidious in his tastes.

He had comrades rather than friends. Mme. de Girardin liked him well enough, notwithstanding that at times his blundering proved rather awkward for her ; Gautier regarded him with that amiable and majestic condescension beyond which his friendships never led him ; Hugo loved him admiringly, and knew moreover how to keep him at arm's-length ; George Sand, who always admired him, whom he liked, and whose portrait he has drawn finely in his *Mademoiselle Maupin*, found him too Rabelaisian, and said to him, 'You are a lewd fellow,' to which he replied, 'You are a beast,' her rejoinder being, 'I'm well aware of it.' I find only Henri Monnier, Léon Gozlan, Méry, and some smaller fry, with whom he had regular and close dealings.

He was not disliked by Lamartine, which is singularly to his honour. The great poet of the ideal thus speaks of him: ‘Balzac was standing [at Mme. de Girardin’s] before the fireplace of this beloved *salon* where I have seen pass and pose [I think that was put in quite guilelessly] so many remarkable men and women. He was not tall, although the brightness of his face and the mobility of his figure made it impossible to reckon his height, for it wavered with his thought ; there seemed to be a gap between him and the ground ; now he would stoop down to earth as though to gather up a sheaf of ideas, and then he would draw himself up on tiptoe in order to follow the flight of his thought towards infinity. He broke off for no more than a minute on my account [he was not in the least shy ; he had not even so much diffidence as befits politeness] ; he was carried away by his conversation with M. and Mme. de Girardin. He gave me a lively, searching, and gracious glance, of extreme benevolence. I drew near him to shake his hand, and saw that we understood one another straight away and without further need of words ; he was in full stream, and could not spare the time for a stoppage. I sat down

and he went on with his monologue, as though my presence had roused him into new life instead of interrupting him. The listening which I gave to his speech afforded me the opportunity of observing his figure in its everlasting undulation. He was fat, solid, square below and across the shoulders ; neck, chest, body, buttocks, and limbs all strongly built, with much of the stoutness of Mirabeau, but without over-weight ; there was so much of soul in it all, that it was borne lightly and joyously, like a supple envelope, and in nowise as a burden ; his arms gesticulated easily ; he talked as though he were an orator holding forth. . . . ' We know that, under the name of Canalis, Balzac has sketched a very beautiful and kindly portrait of Lamartine.

He was a hard worker ; we need not call him an indefatigable one, since it is obvious that fatigue did overcome him, and that, with a strong constitution and born to reach his eighty years, like his father before him, he yet died at fifty. But he was an arduous and powerful workman. He wrote nearly a hundred works (some of them short) in twenty-five or twenty-six years, and did so, not, as has been said, like ' a force of nature ' which always performs the

like function, but in the midst of a thousand projects, a thousand enterprises, and a thousand plans which bubbled up incessantly from his seething brain ; in the midst of a hundred journeyings, and always in the grasp of the harassing cares and deadly embarrassments of his everlasting and eternally renewed debts. His work was usually done by night ; he sometimes worked both day and night, not going out and hardly stirring from his writing-table ; keeping himself going, and unfortunately spurring himself on with innumerable cups of black coffee. *La Cousine Bette* was thus written in six weeks, which works out at ten pages a day, or (more likely) from seven to eight hours of work per day, which is a tremendous rate for those who know what one hour of literary work really means. He corrected, or rather *augmented*, without end. He required five, six, or seven proofs from the printer. It often happened that the manuscript which he delivered to the compositors was for him nothing more than a rough outline which he filled in or a square of canvas on which he embroidered. Like Victor Hugo (as we know from the study of his manuscripts), the reading of his text inspired and suggested his finest traits ; but

what inspired Hugo was his own script, whereas with Balzac it was the print that roused him.

He was an admirable literary workman, upright, conscientious, scrupulous, and arduous. He is of those who have deserved, even on moral grounds, both worldly success and lasting fame.

## II

## HIS GENERAL IDEAS

As his biography has shown us, Balzac's intellectual culture was of the slightest. He had hardly any time for reading, reflecting, or meditating. It is obvious in reading him that he knew nothing of history, had no knowledge of the character or customs of foreign peoples, nor of philosophy, nor of the literature of antiquity, and knew nothing or next to nothing of the literature of the modern world. As regards any one else it might very well be said, 'You know nothing about it; a novelist does not betray his ignorance by the story that he tells, and he may be very well posted without your being aware of it.' That is quite true; but, since Balzac was everlastingly mixing up his dissertations with the stories he had to tell, his inadequate culture is as readily perceived as it would be if we were dealing with a didactic author, and his intellectual upbringing is clearly seen to be of the slightest. It need not be

asked, in dealing with him, what reading had an influence on his mind. It is quite plain that nothing left any trace on him, nor stirred him into a ferment. Of Walter Scott alone need we affirm that he had read him with relish, and that he had a very keen desire to follow in his footsteps.

This lack, though a very grave one, need be no absolute bar to the begetting of general ideas in a vigorous mind. Only, in that case, the ideas can never be other than those proper to the individual temperament and its domestic upbringing. Though it may sometimes seem to be otherwise, it is those very ideas and no others that Balzac had. His philosophy is crude and narrow, full of trenchant axioms, violent paradoxes, without any fineness or subtle differentiation, just like that of a man who studies the brewing of beer. Having met with many hardships at the outset of his life, he looks on men with some bitterness, is misanthropic, and a pessimist in the current meaning now given to that word. Generally speaking, man is for him a brute, made up merely of instincts and interests. An absolute government and a tyrannic religion are necessary to hold him in. Balzac, as his domestic

upbringing inclined him to be, was a Christian. But how came he to be one and for what reasons? Because 'Christianity, and especially Catholicism, being a complete system for repressing man's depraved inclinations, is the strongest element of social order.' He seems to lean (without being yet quite positive or definitely ranging himself on the side of political Catholicism) towards the catholicising function of the monarchy and the catholicising means of rehabilitating it and drawing it into closer understanding with the people, *but* with a view to bringing the people back to the legitimate monarchy. He makes his village priest say, ' My sufferings having given me a close knowledge of secret charity as it has been set forth by the great Saint Paul in his adorable epistle, it was my earnest wish to stanch the unhealing wounds of the poor in some neglected corner of earth so as to prove by my example, if it should please God to bless my efforts, that the Catholic religion, as exemplified in human works, is the only good and beautiful *civilising* power.' Speaking of another priest, Balzac says, ' This priest belonged to that small portion of the French clergy who are in favour of granting such concessions as would tend to identify the

Church with popular interests, and thus help it to reconquer, by the application of true evangelical doctrine, its former influence on the masses, so that it might then join hands with the monarchy.'

His ideas as to our social makeshifts seem to be identical with those of Rousseau, though it is very likely that he never read the *Discours sur l'Inégalité*. He makes one of his characters say to the Marquise d'Anglemont, 'Obey society ! Why, sir, all our ills are the outcome of that. *God has not made only one law for misfortune ; but in gathering themselves together, men have falsified His work.* We women [for example] are worse treated by civilisation than we should be if nature had her way with us. Nature burdens us with physical penalties which you have done nothing to mitigate, and civilisation has developed sentiments which you continually belie. Nature stifles her weaklings ; you condemn them to live on and suffer continual unhappiness. . . .'

In politics, properly so called, he is, as I have before said, in favour of absolute power and of keeping the mob in a state of passive obedience and ignorance. His whole political creed might quite well be summed up in the axiom of Vol-

taire, 'When the people start to use their reason, all is lost.' The journalist Blondet said, 'If the press did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it; but here it is, and by it we live.' 'You will die of it,' answered the diplomatist; 'don't you see that the superiority of the masses, supposing that you enlighten them, will render individual greatness more difficult, that in fostering reason in the heart of the lower classes you will reap revolt and that you will be its first victims? . . .' Hence his horror of the liberty of the press, since it being impossible that newspapers should be anything else than the expression of the passions of the million, they render articulate the 'reason' of the mob and thus make it more eager than before, and that without being answerable, and therefore, without bounds. The press, instead of being a priesthood, has degenerated into a party weapon; from this it has turned to money-making, and in all such business there is neither faith nor law. Every newspaper, as Blondet has said, is a shop that sells to the public the sort of words that are most to its liking. Were there a newspaper for hunchbacks, it would demonstrate, late and early, the beauty, the goodness, and the necessity of

hunchbacks. A newspaper is not made to enlighten opinion, but to flatter it. Thus all newspapers must become, before long, cowardly, hypocritical, lying, murderous ; they will deal death to ideas, system, men, and will batten on their slaughter . . . [and] they will then enjoy the privileges granted to reasoning beings : the evil will come about without any one being held guilty. . . . We shall all alike be guiltless, we shall be able to wash from our hands all trace of shame. Napoleon said, 'Nobody is answerable for collective crimes !'

It is true that Balzac contradicts himself elsewhere by remarking that the great number of newspapers serves to neutralise their force, and this, if not a remedy, at least brings some measure of relief. '*These restrictions, invented in the time of M. de Villèle, who might have given the death-blow to newspapers by scattering them broadcast among the people, created instead a kind of privilege by making the founding of a newspaper an almost impossible undertaking. . . .*' But, in short, it seems highly desirable that newspapers should be simply suppressed, or restricted to the mere office of news-bearers.

What is more curious, the thing which he demanded of authority has been effected by the mob itself. The crowd asked for newspapers which would give it news, and formerly all the newspapers were political, whereas to-day only the non-political have regular subscribers ; and the political sheets, kept going by party funds, and by people who desire a daily renewal of their convictions by the reading of their newspapers, lead a very precarious existence.

It is needless to say that he is quite opposed to everything that goes to-day by the name of Democracy. He saw in it clearly, firstly, its danger for the middle classes, a section of whom were imprudently clamouring for it in his own time ; secondly, the danger of the thing in itself, which was, to his mind, the fact that it can only lead to anarchy. As to the first, he says, ‘ Universal suffrage which is to-day demanded by those belonging to the party known as the constitutional opposition. . . . The triumph of those ideas which serve liberalism in its rash warfare against the prosperous Bourbon government would spell disaster for France and *for the liberals themselves*. The leaders of the left know this quite well. For

them the struggle is no more than a question of power. If the middle class foster, under the banner of the opposition, the very social superiorities against which their own vanity is in revolt, such a triumph would at once bring about a struggle between themselves and the people, who would look on them as a sort of aristocracy, of a meaner kind indeed, yet an aristocracy whose privileges would be the more irksome from its greater nearness to themselves. . . .’ Secondly, democracy is in itself a danger to society, which it rends asunder: ‘Universal suffrage was an excellent principle for the Church, since there all individuals were equally well-educated, brought into line by the same system, knowing quite well what they wanted and where they were going [in a word, universal suffrage is excellent for an aristocratic body]. But . . . in truth, I think I have given proof of my devotion to the poor and the suffering, and I could hardly be accused of wishing that harm should befall it; only, while full of admiration for it in those laborious paths along which it toils, sublimely patient and resigned, I declare it incapable of taking any share in government. I look on the working classes as the minors of a nation

who should always remain as its wards in chancery. Thus, to my thinking, the word *election* is likely to cause as much harm as has already been wrought by those misunderstood and ill-defined words *conscience* and *liberty*, which have been scattered abroad as symbols of revolt and orders of destruction.'

Another point which he makes is this, that the modern spirit, with its unbridled materialism, destroys successively the spirit of the family and the family itself ; that it replaces, as the sociologists would say, the family unit by the individual unit, and that it is, in consequence, seething with anarchy and the poison of dissolution. 'Societies must always be based on the family. Necessarily a makeshift, incessantly splitting up, recomposed only to break asunder again, without any link between the future and the past, the family of old times no longer exists in France. [He means to say that the family of to-day has nothing in common with that of bygone days which no longer exists in France.] Those who have helped forward the destruction of the ancient building have been logical in sharing equally the family goods, in restricting paternal authority, in

making each child the head of a new family, in doing away with large responsibilities ; but is the social state thus reconstructed as stable, with its new laws tested for so short a while, as was the monarchy with its old abuses ? In the loss of family solidarity, society loses that fundamental strength Montesquieu discovered and called *honour*.<sup>1</sup> It has isolated every one so as to domineer the more easily ; it has shared out everything in order to weaken all. It rules over units, over figures thrown together like grains of wheat in a heap. Can general interests ever replace the family ? Time alone can resolve this great problem.'

Hence one of Balzac's bugbears is the civil code, which was drawn up with a view, in forecast, of a tradition-hating and all-levelling democracy. The civil code legalised divorce, which had only been abolished by the *Chambre introuvable*<sup>2</sup> of 1816 and which the liberals desired to restore, since they looked on it as one of the benefits achieved by the French Revolution, and Balzac writes, ' . . . Perhaps no

<sup>1</sup> Let us overlook the fact that Balzac, never having read Montesquieu and speaking merely from hearsay, has no inkling of what the latter meant by *honour*.

<sup>2</sup> An ultra-royalist and blindly reactionary government to which this nickname has stuck.—TR.

picture from my hand shows better than this how the indissolubility of marriage is indispensable to European society. . . .’ The civil code had done away with the family, or done its best to do away with it. It had wiped out primogeniture and freedom of willing by testament, had insisted on the father’s belongings being shared by all his children equally, to the destruction of the *house* and the continuity of the family line from generation to generation, and Balzac writes, ‘The family, sir? Is there any such thing? I deny the family [I deny that the family exists] in a society which, on the death of father or of mother, divides up their possessions and bids each go his own way. The family is a temporary and haphazard association which falls to pieces as soon as a death occurs. Our laws have broken up our homes, our heritages, the permanence of example and tradition. I see nothing but ruins around me. . . .’ And he writes again, ‘The civil code’s right of inheritance, which ordains the sharing up of property, is the stake which, by being continually driven in, splits up the land into tiny morsels, individualises fortunes by taking away their necessary stability, and which, by taking

everything to pieces without ever putting it together again, will culminate in the destruction of France.'

The modern code again has set up juries, and Balzac, in passing, lets fall this curious remark as to their mentality—'Hulot found that his vice absolved him; vice, in the midst of its unbridled luxury, smiled on him. The grandeur of his crime was held to be an extenuating circumstance, just as happens with juries.'

His literary ideas are never outlined with sufficient clearness to permit a direct reply to an inquiry as to what were the aesthetic theories which he held. His verdict on *Ruy Blas* shows that he looked on the romantic drama (and by that we mean also the romanesque drama) as extravagant; his verdict on George Sand's *Jacques*—'false from beginning to end . . . these writers wander in space . . . driving their steeds through vacancy'—that *romanesque characters* (of which many may be met with both in life and in his own works) were not at all to his liking. His verdict on the *Volupté* of Sainte-Beuve and on that writer's style proves, on the one hand, that the virtuous and declamatory woman seemed to him

‘not womanish enough,’ and on the other hand, that he could not bear the style of psychological analysis, finely shaded and slightly precious. His general verdict on George Sand, in which he puts his finger on her weak spots, and by inference, on all that is lacking, shows that, to Balzac’s way of thinking, in order to write a novel there must be ‘strength of conception, power of constructing a plan, the faculty of getting at the truth, and that of touching the heart.’ And all that, though interesting enough, is not very new.

Here we have all, or very nearly all, of Balzac’s general ideas, and it is quite needless for me to remark that they are merely those common during his time to the circles in which he moved, and that they would only be really worth study had they been gone into so thoroughly as to give them a meaning special to himself, or, on the other hand, if they had been expressed with such clearness and radiancy as sometimes gives newness to notions that are trite. It is not so here, and if sometimes, as we have just seen in those lines of his above quoted, there is some skill in the way he expresses his doctrines, he has just as often a way of setting them forth that gives rise to a doubt

as to whether he understands what he is talking about, as may be seen in the following example, which is only one of many that we might bring forward : ‘ The fault of governments in our day is that they mould society less for man than man for society. An unending struggle goes on between the individual and the system that would exploit him, and which he strives to exploit for his own profit ; while formerly man, in reality freer, bore himself more generously towards the common weal. The circle round the centre of which the interests of men now revolve is insensibly enlarged ; the mind which is able to resume in itself all the scattered elements will never be other than a magnificent exception ; for, habitually, in the moral world as in the physical, movement gains in intensity what it loses in dispersion. Society should not be founded on exceptions. First of all, when man was merely a father and no more, his heart beat warmly, concentrated within his own home. Later on he lived for a small republic ; thence sprang the great historic devotions of Greece and of Rome. Then he became the living shrine of a caste or of a religion for the greatness of which he often showed sublime behaviour ; but therein the

scope of his interests was widened by intellectual extension on every side. To-day his life is allied to that of an immense country; soon, we are told, he will belong to the whole world. Is not this moral cosmopolitanism, the hope of Christian Rome, a sublime mistake? It is so natural to believe in the realisation of a noble chimera, in the brotherhood of man! But, alas, the human mechanism cannot boast such god-like proportions. Minds whose scope is vast enough to experience the kind of feeling reserved only for the great, will never belong either to simple citizens or to fathers of families. Certain physiologists hold that when the brain thus expands, the heart must contract. Nonsense! The seeming selfishness of men who bear in their bosoms the burden of a science, a nation, or of laws, what is it but the most noble of passions, and, in its own way, the mothering of multitudes? In order to bring forth new peoples or to produce new ideas must they not comprise in their powerful heads the breasts of woman and the force of God? The story of a Pope Innocent III., of a Peter the Great, and of every leader of an age or of a nation would prove, if needed, in the highest way, this far-reaching thought for which

Troubert stood sponsor in the shadow of Saint-Gatien's cloisters.'

Now such stuff is pitiful, and it is very frequent with him; so that Balzac as thinker cannot be spoken of without some hesitation.

## III

## HIS GENERAL VIEW OF MANKIND

HE believes, as I have said, man to be wicked, a prey to his instincts, appetites, vices, and interests, and generally quite incapable of disinterested or charitable conduct. It even looks as though he were rather glad when rascals succeeded ; his own generally got on and finished up in a blaze of glory. He seems to hanker after the bitter pleasure that consists in discovering that in order to get on it is only necessary to be a rogue. That is just the mental outlook of the misanthrope who bears a grudge against the successful good man for spoiling his enjoyment in despising mankind. ‘ I see plainly,’ said a misanthrope, ‘ that some honest men make their way in the world ; but I begrudge it them, since they upset my theories and deprive me of the enjoyment that I get from the scoundrels that come out on top.’

Now this notion is quite false. Obviously it is not the saints that get on or that can get on.

They have too many scruples ; they have too many qualms of conscience ; they are too prone to ask themselves after a success, 'What crime is it that I have been about ?' Moreover, they have too much brotherly good-feeling, and just when they are about to help themselves to a slice they begin wondering if it will not do some one harm, and it is only too sure that they must always answer 'Yes.' Saints do not succeed, nor is success within their power.

But no more is it the scoundrels that get on. At least they very seldom do so. They are too eager, too hasty to be prudent, circumspect, or astute, and they are always blundering. The blunders of Tartuffe have a good deal of truth in them.

It is the persevering respectable nobodies who get on, and certainly Balzac has often bestowed success on them, for he has a clear-seeing eye ; but, allowing himself to be led away by his theories, he destroys verisimilitude by conferring it too often on downright rogues.

As for his looking on man as being almost always a blind follower of his appetites and interests, it must be allowed, at the outset, that he is right, following it up with an observation which may excuse him, and adding that

he himself makes many and very considerable exceptions.

The observation which at least excuses him is this : We must not say, as has been said with an authority which almost makes me waver despite conviction, that a novelist can no more be reproached with immorality than a historian, and that if the mission of the novel is to show us life as a whole, it should enjoy the same freedom as is granted to history, and its sole duty should be subjection to its material. We should not say that, for the simple reason that the novelist is not subject to his material, while the historian is so, completely. The historian must submit to the real facts and to all of them, while the novelist may choose where he will. If, then, history is only immoral when it is untruthful, the novel is immoral *both* when it is untruthful *and* when, without being untruthful it prefers the evil rather than the good in mankind, in order to describe it with an obvious complaisance.

It is no such excuse then that we need bring forward in Balzac's defence, or rather in order to settle in our minds how he may be excused. It must be said that Balzac—and from the artistic standpoint it is one of his great merits—

has given us a view of men not merely as they are in themselves or within the narrow circle of their own dwellings and homes, but in their common dealings one with another, and in their social relations. Now this is the best way, if I may so express it, of seeing their worst side, and of seeing them worse than they really are. A glance at life as a whole reveals the struggle for life as its most outstanding feature. None of us at bottom are either all good or all evil; but we seem, and indeed we are, worse in our outward deeds than we are in our inward selves. Left alone within our family circle, we usually aspire towards what is good. Once outside, we are carried away by conflicting interests that send us jostling rudely one against the other, which rouse and madden in us that instinct to struggle which we then feel necessary for us to win our way through. These instincts, which we would gladly leave in slumber, are roused by the sight of a competitor who himself feels his own stirring at the sight of ourselves. Men must therefore appear in the most unfavourable light to a novelist who depicts society and man as a social unit. Now, this is just what Balzac always did. It is hardly possible that the social novel

should be otherwise than pessimistic when set beside the homely, the intimate, and the domestic novel; and the test, as interesting as it is easy to apply, is that as soon as a social novel becomes domestic it ceases to be gloomy, as in *Peace and War*, and it brightens up and shows us the same men in a much better light than they had appeared but a short while before.

And I would add that Balzac has, moreover, made many exceptions. His work shows us many upright people who are not victims. If we counted we should find the straight folk nearly as many as the crooked. The righteous people are generally priests, doctors, officers of the first Empire (and if Philippe Brideau may always be quoted, so should the heroic veterans of honour who appear in *la Cousine Bette*), artists, collectors, literary men such as Cenacle, who is in such strong contrast to the journalists of *Illusions perdues*, business men such as César Birotteau, legal men such as the advocate Derville, etc.

There are women admirably honest and noble-hearted, such as the Baroness Hulot, Ursule Mirouet, Eugénie Grandet, and even Mme. de Mortsauf.

And it has been said (and I have myself confirmed it) that his honest people are usually a trifle silly. It is true that among them we find a Schmucke and an Abbé Birotteau ; but that is not to say that they are all like that, and the country doctor, Doctor Mirouet, the advocate Derville, and many others are not at all so. He shows us many honest people who know what they are about and are quite shrewd, and many who devote themselves to humanity without expecting any reward, or those who, disillusioned, retire to their tents slightly wearied but entirely serene. Of such is Derville—‘ Do you know that there are three men in society, the priest, the doctor, and the lawyer, who cannot think well of the world ? They all wear black, perhaps because they are in mourning for all virtue and for all illusions. The unhappiest of them all is the lawyer. When a man seeks out the priest, he is driven on by repentance, by remorse, by a faith which makes him of interest, which ennobles him, and brings consolation to the soul of the mediator, whose task cannot be carried out without some sense of joyousness : he purifies, he makes good past trespass, he reconciles. But we lawyers see nothing but the same ill feelings ;

nothing alters them ; our studies are like foul cisterns that cannot be cleansed. I know. . . . I know. . . . In short all the horrors that novelists fancy they invent still fall short of the truth. I am going away to live in the country with my wife.'

Balzac gives us pictures, then, of very intelligent and very virtuous people, who find vice revolting and cannot bear the sight of it. To this we may add that his virtuous people, though they may seem rather silly, are not so much so when looked at closely. There is a great deal of truth in showing them us as finding in the heroism of their friendship the cleverness and cunning which are prompted in others only by cupidity or mean trickery ; and such characters as Schmucke and Pons, whom, moreover, he has painted lovingly, are very interesting when considered in this light.

When all has been reckoned up (and unfortunately this is no more than a phrase, since in such matters our reckoning can never be complete), Balzac does not seem to me to have cast too much of a slur on humanity. Only a very little contradiction might tempt me to aver that he was inclined to flatter it. The illusion comes about from the fact that his

rogues are so powerfully depicted, and he excelled so wonderfully in portraying such types, that all his other characters are thrown into shadow and seem blurred beside them ; but it is no fault of his if the rogues stand out more distinctly, in higher relief, and with a more vivid colouring, simply as the result of their offering greater opportunities to the painter. The same thing happens in the novel as in the tragedy, where the terrible bandit makes a far greater impression on the spectator and remains unforgettably in his memory, while the honest man, although having been in nowise overlooked, wins no more than his bare approval and is readily forgotten.

Notice again that Balzac always kept ' some of virtue's soiled wrappings ' about him (as Vautrin has it), and these are very pleasant to observe. Is it not curious to notice that he has full faith in the remorse of criminals (see the conclusion of *Ursule Mirouet*), while it is proved beyond doubt that only honest people know remorse, and that rogues have no notion of what it means ? Balzac was too good a psychologist, and knew men too well to bestow remorse on an out-and-out rogue ; he gives it to a man who has made only one slip or rare

ones ; and yet he gives it also to a man who has never had a noble or an honest thought, one who has never thought of anything else but money, one to whom we should deem remorse forbidden ; and this failing, or half failing, is greatly to his honour.

He saw in society first of all, and before everything else, the *auri sacra fames*, the famous thirst for gold, the mad and universal onrush in pursuit of fortune. The sentence of La Bruyère but slightly varied might well serve as a headline to almost the whole of Balzac's work—‘There are some foul souls, kneaded together out of filth and spawn, who yearn after money and personal advantage in just the same way as those finer souls who yearn after glory and virtue, incapable of any other delight than that which comes from gain or the avoidance of loss ; inquisitive and eagerly hankering after the smallest farthing, their whole attention taken up by their debtors, everlastingly uneasy about the rise and fall of money values, weighed down and smothered by contracts, title-deeds, and parchment. Such men are neither friends nor citizens, nor perchance are they men : what they *want* is money.’ Money is, in Balzac, what the far-away Princess

is for Rostand's knights-errant, what Italy was for the companions of *Æneas*, ' that towards which the rowers steered,' indefatigably, over hidden rocks and through tempests, braving even death for its sake. You know the famous sonnet of Hérédia through which he has so skilfully threaded the *two* motives which drove onward the *Cenquistadores* to the conquest of the West Indian isles :

As hawks, their lofty eyries bare of prey,  
Quit the ancestral shambles and sweep down,  
Athirst for *rapine* or for *high renown*,  
Freebooters and proud captains sailed away.

They sought that *wondrous metal hoard* that lay  
In the remotest dark of caverns lone ;  
The trade-winds, on their tightened canvas blown,  
Toward *veiled* western *borders* clove the spray.

At eve all eager for the heroic war,  
The phosphorescent waves filled all their rest  
With *phantom glory of the gold* in quest ;  
Or, from the prow, they counted star by star  
*New splendours* rise beyond the last wave's crest  
Over *unknown horizons* very far.

From these two motives, the thirst for gold and the love of adventure, of the mysterious and of the unknown, cut away the second ; of the heroic and brutal dreams leave only the brutal, and you have exactly the mental out-

look of mankind as it seemed to Balzac almost wholly. It is his first and his most outstanding characteristic. ““ May the devil take your good God,”” replied Grandet grumbling [in *Eugénie Grandet*]. Misers have no belief in a future life ; the present is all in all to them. This reflection throws a very sinister light on the days in which we are living, when, more than ever before, it is money that dominates our laws, our politics, and our whole way of living. Institutions, books, men, and doctrines all conspire to undermine that belief in a future life on which the social edifice has been supported for eighteen hundred years. Now the grave is hardly looked upon as a stage of transition. The future to which we looked forward far beyond the *requiem* has been transferred into the present. To reach *per fas aut nefas* the worldly paradise of luxury and unlimited enjoyment, to harden the heart and mortify the body in order to get hold of fleeting possessions, just as formerly men suffered life-long martyrdom in order to ensure their eternal welfare — such is now the general thought ! And it is a thought moreover which is written plainly everywhere, even in the laws which ask of a legislator “ How do you pay ? ”

instead of “How do you think?” When this doctrine is passed on from the middle classes to the lower, what is to become of the country?’

In *la Cousine Bette* we find: ‘You make a great mistake, my dear angel, if you think that it is King Louis Philippe who reigns, and he himself is under no delusion about it. He knows as well as any of us, that, over and above the charter of the Constitution, there is the holy, venerated, solid, pleasant, gracious, lovely, noble, young, and almighty coin of one hundred sous. . . . May the God of the Jews away with it! In short it is the eternal allegory of the golden calf. . . .’ And again: “How does this great evil come about?” asks the baroness. “From the lack of religion,” replies the doctor, “and from the inroads of finance, which is nothing else than selfishness solidified. Money, formerly, was not everything; we allowed that there were superiorities of which money was the award. There was nobility, talent, service rendered to the state; but to-day the law makes money the standard; it has even made it a test of fitness for the vote. Certain magistrates are not eligible; Jean Jacques Rousseau would not be eligible! [nor an elector]. The perpetual dividing up of inheritance forces

everybody to look out for himself as soon as he reaches twenty years. Ah well ! between the necessity of making a fortune and the slow corruption of underhand manœuvring, no obstacles are set ; for religious sentiment is far to seek in France, despite the noble efforts of those who are striving to bring about a Catholic revival ; there you have what everybody is saying who contemplates, as I do, society in its nethermost depths.'

Such is Balzac's central thought. But that, were it not for the intensity that he puts into it, would hardly distinguish him from his predecessors, and Marivaux (in his *Paysan parvenu* and in his *Marianne*) and Le Sage and La Bruyère have all—naturally—realised it quite as fully. But what Balzac has strikingly underlined and with his own special mark is the new scope for ambition in the modern world. Under the old-time régime, graces being reserved for a single privileged class, the strife for favour was restricted to it. In modern society it is spread throughout the whole nation. In a state which has remained centralised while becoming democratic, the whole country takes on the character of the court of Versailles. When Figaro said to Almaviva, ' You took the

trouble to be born,' the latter might have answered, ' And also to intrigue. And do you complain of that ? A time will come when you will be obliged to spend as much time on intrigue as we do.' Balzac saw that quite plainly, and it is one of the things which gives to his work its cohesion, its reality, and its life. The importance of *connections*, the often-heard '*Whom do you know?*' which has now replaced the former '*Of what family?*'; the constant preoccupation with friendships to be fostered or to be conferred, of influences to be brought into play, of recommendations to be obtained by hook or by crook, are all found time and again in the pages of his work. Balzac does not name a clerk in the law-courts without pointing out that he is related to the Parisots, nor a justice of the peace without having made sure that he is second cousin to the Grandlieus. There are negotiations for bringing about marriages, diplomatic campaigns for acquiring inheritances, Wars of the Roses, with alliances, agreements, sharing out of the spoil, truces, and treaties, all with a view to climbing the social ladder. Modern life is there, not the whole of it certainly, but it is there truthfully shown and observed in a new and original way, in the

unity of its main impulse and its infinite variety of circumstance. And in such trafficking he is worthy of close attention and a very important witness as to what was taking place in his own time.

Certain things even which are no longer true—and let us beware of putting it down too readily to the romanesque and the romantic—were at the time of writing almost as bad as he made them out to be. For example, the enormous power which he attributes to the press, to a handful of literary bandits making reputations or ruining them, seems to us a paradox in days when newspapers hold only a very uncertain sway and their power is mainly financial. But let us remember that in Balzac's day the press was not free, that the number of newspapers was very limited, and that it is just in such circumstances that the press becomes almighty, its authority being in inverse ratio to the freedom which it enjoys ; and the small number of newspapers makes it very easy for them to join hands, while a multiplicity of them on the contrary serves to neutralise the mass, a phenomenon which, as we have already seen, Balzac himself anticipated.

Sometimes even this 'realist' or 'naturalist' (if this quite unsuitable label must be fixed on him) makes a sort of sudden leap into the realms of the ideal, which is very curious and renders him very attractive. It is rare, but still it does happen. I am not alluding to the occultism of *Séraphita* or the magnetism of *Ursule Mirouet*, which seem to me to be simply the outcome of Balzac's curiosity during a passing whim, a curiosity that was roused by his mother's reading of Swedenborg, and, in addition, by the movement strongly imbued with occultism and cabalism which took place about 1840; I allude rather to what may be called the poetry of realism, to the exaltation of humble joys, the manner in which he felt and expressed the strong and healthy relish of popular labour, the manner in which he felt and makes us feel the freshness of the soul that rests before plunging once more into physical activity. 'We arrived just at that point when the vine-harvesting in Touraine becomes a downright festival. The house is full of people and of provisions. The wine-presses are going all the time. Everything seems to be alive with the movement of coopers, of two-wheeled carts loaded with laughing girls, of people who,

earning the best wages of the whole year, start singing on the slightest excuse. . . . I looked at the pretty hedges all beaded and spiked, and covered with red fruit; I hearkened to the shouting children, I gazed at the swarming harvesters, the cartful of casks, and the men with baskets strapped on their backs. . . . Then I fell to gathering the grapes, filling my basket, and going to empty it into the grape-barrel in silence and with a great steadiness of bodily endeavour that was kept going with a slow and measured stride that seemed to set free my soul. I tasted the ineffable pleasure of an open-air labour that drives life onward by curbing the passions which, without such physical drill, might burn up everything. I felt how much wisdom there is in such recurrent toil, and I realised the meaning of the monastic orders.' The style may not be first-rate, but the inspiration is on a high plane, the thought is powerful, the painting shows a vision of wide range, and I should be very glad for the honour of my country if the admirable passage which Tolstoi devotes to the hay-making were directly derived from it. In any case it is a singular merit in each that it recalls the other.

It has been said that from his general view of the modern world love was entirely shut out. That seems to me to be very far from the truth. As a matter of fact, young lads in love are rare enough, and Balzac's young men are mastered by ambition, which, we may remark in passing, is yet another fact not to be denied ; but he gives us plenty of young girls and young women who are in love. There is Ursule Mirouet, there is Eugénie Grandet, there is Modeste Mignon, there is *la femme de trente ans*, there is *la femme abandonnée*, there is the lady of *la Grenadière*, there is Coralie of the *Illusions perdues*, and there are plenty of others. His women in love are generally rather childish ; they fall in love for nothing at all, without any apparent psychological reason, and in a sudden flash, though we need not say it never happens otherwise, but it is quite rare (Ursule Mirouet, Eugénie Grandet, Coralie) ; sometimes in circumstances which, without Balzac intending or foreseeing it, are comical : Ursule Mirouet falling in love with Savinien on seeing him in the distance shaving himself and 'bearing himself with such grace . . .' It cannot be denied that they are a trifle silly ; but they love profoundly, with a gentle stubbornness, so

quiet and resigned, that makes them very pathetic.

And as regards love at another age, let us not forget that Balzac gave us the woman of thirty *as pathetic and not ridiculous in her loving*, and that this type, to which he owed half of his success with the public (and I believe he knew what he was about), is from every point of view excellent, the more so since, carried away, likely enough, by certain of his own memories, he drew it with accuracy, a flawless detail, and the finest of shading. I pass by his elderly lovers, who are quite admirable (I mean the portraits which he draws of them), and, to sum up, I am astonished that it should so often be said of Balzac's work that 'there is too little love in it.' With plenty of experience, and knowing well what was required, Balzac took good care that love should always figure in his novels, since it is bound to be met with in the dramas of real life ; he has given it as large a place in his works as it occupies in the world without, so much so that I am half inclined to say that there is more love in Balzac than in life itself ; but here again is a case where statistics are difficult to come at.

Elsewhere there are gaps. Indeed, this

picture of mankind, this ample comedy of a hundred diverse acts of which the scene is the whole world, as his admirers have so often said and as he himself claimed, is brimful of widely diverse characters, it is true ; and yet they have been gathered together from a comparatively small circle. His knowledge was confined to the middle classes, and what he knew of the upper ten was very slight and obviously of the most superficial kind. Solicitors, attorneys, barristers,<sup>1</sup> recorders, bailiffs, money-lenders, dealers, shopkeepers, bookkeepers, country squires, provincial men of independent means, smallholders, the clergy of town or country, doctors, students, stage folk (but ill-known), journalists :—that is his world. Where are the workmen, officials, soldiers, manufacturers, judges, parliamentary people, election agents, bureaucrats (save Marneffe, *les Employés* being negligible), the professors (so important between 1830 and 1848, as Brunetière remarked so well), the monks, nuns, women teachers, and domestic servants ? The huge world of the peasantry was quite unknown to him, as is clearly shown

<sup>1</sup> Brunetière says that there are no barristers in Balzac ; there are no others, it is true, save only—Albert Savarus.

by what he has said of them ; and it is curious that George Sand's idealised peasants, although highly fashioned, are a very great deal nearer the truth than his own, which are wholly imaginary.

Another very serious shortcoming is that there are no children in Balzac. We get only a passing glimpse, lightly outlined in *la Grenadière*. A picture of mankind without any children in it is very incomplete.

This painter of humanity, it must be owned, shows us no more than the middle classes under Louis Philippe, with its memories of the by-gone military world of the first Empire ; nothing beyond that : but that in nowise prevents him from reaching the highest rank among those who paint society for us in the pages of the novel ; but we must not overstate the case.

And what he knew best of all, in spite of his being the first to exploit the novel of provincial life, was Paris. There, observe that from the upper ten (though his hand was still not very sure when depicting high life) down to the gate-keepers, policemen, and street bullies, he knew almost everything, and gave everything so stern a look and such a lifelike mien that we *recognise* two or three hundred men and

women whom we have never seen, who lived in our father's time, and who are just as familiar to us as though they lived in our own. Balzac might well be called King of Paris, in so far as it be granted that it is kings who know their subjects.

Moreover, he detested it whole-heartedly. ‘‘When Blücher,’’ said the foreign diplomatist, ‘‘arrived on the heights of Montmartre with Saacken in 1814—excuse me, gentlemen, for reminding you of this fatal day—Saacken, who was a dull lout, said: ‘We are going to burn up Paris.’ ‘Take care that you do nothing of the sort,’ answered Blücher, pointing out the vast canker that lay stretching away beneath them, swollen and smoking, in the valley of the Seine, ‘that thing alone will bring death to France.’ ’ ’ ’

And again: ‘Charles was nonetheless a child of Paris, trained by the habits of Paris, even by Annette herself, to calculate everything, and already an old man beneath his mask of youthful seeming. He had received the ghastly education of a world where, in a single evening, more wrong is done by thought and word than justice can punish in the assize courts, where smart talk deals out summary death to

the loftiest ideals ; where only those who see plainly are regarded as clever ; and there seeing plainly implies an entire lack of belief in anything, whether it be in sentiments, or men, or even in events : for sham events are always being invented in such circles. There, to see plainly you must weigh every morning your friend's purse, so that you may know how to keep on the safe side ; you must be careful lest you admire anything, whether it be works of art or noble deeds, and you must not attribute to anything a higher motive than personal advantage.' And given Balzac's personal temperament, we may be sure that the things he said the most ill of were the things which he knew best.

In this connection he clearly recognised yet another essential element of modern French life (I cannot call it the best), to wit, provincial jealousy in respect of Paris, a jealousy so fruitful of disastrous consequences that the provinces *have given up reading* because books are made at Paris ; that a patient leaving Paris for the provinces is at once treated by his new doctor in a manner different from the one who looked after him in the capital, Parisian medical men being all regarded alike

as dunces or quacks ; so that the provincial, should he make his way at Paris, is looked at askance by his fellow-townspeople when he returns among them, and so on. “ “ At last we ’ve got rid of the Parisians,” ejaculated Max. “ The man that struck me had no idea of doing us such a good turn.” The next day, the departure of the Parisians was celebrated by the whole town as a victory for the Province against *[sic]* Paris. Some of Max’s friends held forth with great severity on the Brideaus : “ Ah well, these Parisian fellows fancied that we were noodles and that they had only to hold out their hats for legacies to come pouring in like rain ! ”—“ They came here after our wool ; but they are going back fleeced. . . . And their counsel was a Parisian barrister, if you please.”—“ Ah ! they had concocted a plan ? ”—“ Why, yes ; they thought that they were going to make old Rouget knuckle under ; but the Parisians found the task too heavy for them and the barrister won’t crow over the Berrichons.”—“ Do you know what is abominable ? why, these Parisian fellows.” The town looked on the Brideaus as Parisians and foreigners ; and hence they sided with Max and Flori.’

Such is Balzac's general outlook on the society of his day and on society as a whole. No one in such a matter is in a position to say, 'This is true, and that is false,' so slender must be the information even of the best informed among us. Moreover, I shall take very good care not to attach any importance to the pretty and spiteful saying of Sainte-Beuve : 'Balzac, the novelist who best knew the corruption of his time and was one of those who added to it'; nor this other of the same critic : 'No one has ever made such a parade of the dirty linen of the human rubbish-heap.' I shall say merely this : that Balzac was the historian who best knew a certain section of the society of his day; who had the closest knowledge of its ruling passions; who knew all that was evil in it, and even all that was good; who excelled in showing its anatomy and in painting it with a slight tendency to give it us in its more evil guise, but with a power less sure of mastery in rendering the good than the evil, even though he may perhaps have been equally desirous of doing justice to both.

## IV

## HIS ART AND ITS MAKE-UP

WE have seen that Balzac pronounced George Sand lacking in the power of ' laying down the main lines of a design.' He had a good deal of justification for such a verdict, but he was quite the dupe of his own flattery in imagining that he himself was any better off. His work is always clear, but his way of putting it together makes it quite other than a work of art. The proportions are in nowise measured. His openings are almost always prodigiously slow, and his conclusions at times very abrupt—he sometimes brings them about by an accident (as in *Ursule Mirouet*), which offends all the laws of great art. At other times they are too long foreseen, and so long drawn out as to make the reader restive and impatient; though there are exceptions, such as *Eugénie Grandet*, *le Cousin Pons*, and *le Colonel Chabert*.

But more often than not the author hails his *hors-d'œuvre* with an expansive hospitality

that is anything but pleasing. His huge descriptive beginnings are well known. I own to being greatly interested by their careful realism, just as I am interested by many pages of Stendhal's *Mémoires d'un Touriste*; I grant also that no proper understanding of the human animal is possible unless you give me a close view of the surroundings in which he moves and the house which he inhabits. But too much is too much, and I have no need of a hundred pages to get an impression of reality or to discern the aspect of a house, and I often have the feeling with Balzac that he is describing for the sake of describing, and that he has more than a little of the well-known garrulity of the tourist.

And this is the more marked since his descriptions of dwellings—not always, but often enough—do not help in the least towards an understanding of the characters. The essential protagonists in *Père Goriot* are Goriot, Rastignac, and Vautrin. All three find themselves at the Pension Vauquer by stress of circumstances, and the Pension Vauquer has not had, and does not have, the slightest influence on their characters, and is therefore quite irrelevant. The Vauquer dwelling ex-

plains nothing but Mme. Vauquer. 'Every inmate helps to account for the pension, just as the pension implies everybody in it.' Granted; but she herself is the only person whom the pension explains or implies, and she is just the least important character in the novel. Hence the description is unnecessary. I admit that, in itself, it is very agreeable.

These preliminary descriptions are often quite toilsome. The reader feels that, even if useful, they should be brief and agile at the beginning, and that afterwards they should fall easily into line with the main body of the story. Material reality surrounds us and follows us throughout our whole existence; it should be shown running like a thread through the whole story, drawn out here and there with skill, merged in the behaviour of the personages, and showing us the picture held within the elastic framework of worldly circumstance. And so true is this, it seems to me, that, having set out with these descriptions of material things, Balzac begins them all over again, and has partly to repeat them in the course of his story. This clearly shows that at the beginning they were irrelevant, at least when set forth at such length.

Another still more serious fault appears in those digressions, those *excursus*, those parabases (and in this matter our pedantic terminology is quite the most fitting) with which Balzac continually intrudes upon his story ; and these intrusions are of such a kind that, were the telling duly planned and put together with art, they would necessitate a complete re-casting. George Sand at least delivered such dissertations and arguments from the mouths of her characters, which helped somewhat in the telling of her story and in letting us see into the mind of the speakers. Balzac holds up his story, starts talking on his own account, and gives us a lecture. It looks as though, goaded on by the demon of journalism —we know that he founded a review and often tried to found others—and having a lot of reserve 'copy' at the back of his drawer which he was unable to get printed in the newspapers of his day, he drained it all into his novels. Sometimes he starts off with a lecture which replaces the huge description with which he is so fond of beginning his novels ; sometimes his lectures are patched on to the fabric of his story so brusquely and at such length as to rend it in twain. He

breaks off his narrative in the *Lys dans la Vallée* in order to pluck us by the sleeve and say: 'Notice how profoundly English love differs from our own. It is devastating and volcanic; no one but an Englishman could have written *Romeo and Juliet*; Juliet's love is essentially English.' I should be more inclined to believe that it was Italian, but it is not that that I find so little to my liking; it is the sight of the narrative broken off for the sake of an ethnological lecture. As a matter of fact, at this point neither did I find the story itself of any further interest.

On the other hand, old Goriot gives Rastignac confidences of the highest interest. Rastignac is admirable in them; but Balzac intervenes with 'One thing is worth noticing. . . .' Let us on with our noticing then! 'No matter how coarse a woman may be, no sooner does she express a strong and genuine affection, than she seems to give off a particular fluid that softens her features, lights up her gestures, and gives a more varied thrill to the tones of her voice. The most stupid creature, under the spur of passion, often soars to the greatest eloquence of idea, though it may not be of language, and seems to move within

a sphere of light. There was, at this moment, in the voice and gesture of this good man, that personal magnetism that marks out the great actor. But are not our finer feelings the poetry of the will' [?]

Rastignac calls on Madame de Nucingen, with whom he is not in love, though he is curious about her; Balzac does not follow the caller, but bids us follow himself in these words: 'A young man perhaps finds as much charm in his first intrigue as he does in his first love. Assurance of success has a thousandfold bliss to which men do not own, and the whole attraction of certain women lies in that desire is the offspring no less of hardship than of ease in conquering. All the passions of men are assuredly fanned into being and their flames fostered either by one or the other of these two causes, which share between them the empire of love. It may be that this division is settled by the great question of the temperaments which dominate—whatever may be said to the contrary—the social world [ah! has any one ever denied the fact?] If melancholy people require coyness to spur them on, it is likely enough that nervous or full-blooded folk would retire from the attack if resistance were too

prolonged. In other words, the elegy is just as essentially lymphatic as the dithyramb is bilious. . . .'

Madame Hulot has just shown indulgence, mingled with a vast deal of weakness, for her husband. Balzac draws us aside to remark : 'The moralist can hardly deny that people who are both well-bred and vicious may be much more pleasant than those who are virtuous. Having to condone for their ill-deeds, they pave the way for indulgence by being very easy-going with the faults of those who should judge them, and so they pass for excellent fellows. Although there are charming people among the virtuous, virtue deems that her own beauty should suffice, without her stooping to win us over ; and then really righteous people (for we must rule out the hypocrites) are nearly always a little uneasy as to their standing ; they think themselves cheated in the world's wide market, and they are rather apt to speak sharply in the manner of folks who fancy themselves slighted. . . .'

Elsewhere, because a young artist's first work happens to be dashing, he says : 'It is not every work of genius which has this degree of brilliance, this splendour that is obvious to

every one, no matter how ignorant he may be. Thus certain pictures of Raphael, such as the celebrated 'Transfiguration,' the 'Madonna de Foligno,' the frescoes of the 'Stanze' in the Vatican, do not win our immediate homage as do the 'Violin Player' in the Sciarra Gallery, the 'Portraits of the Doni' and the 'Vision of Ezekiel' in the Pitti Gallery, the 'Carrying of the Cross' in the Borghese Gallery, the 'Marriage of the Virgin' in the Brera Museum at Milan. The 'Saint John the Baptist' of the Tribune, 'Saint Luke painting the Virgin' in the Academy at Rome are by no means so winning as the 'Portrait of Léon x.' and the 'Virgin' at Dresden. Nevertheless they are all of equal worth. Moreover, the 'Stanze,' the 'Transfiguration,' the cameos, and the three small easel-pictures at the Vatican reach to the highest level of the perfect and the sublime. But these masterpieces strain the understanding even of the least-qualified student, and require study for their adequate appreciation ; whereas the 'Violinist,' the 'Marriage of the Virgin,' the 'Vision of Ezekiel' go straight through the eyes to the heart, and are at home there ; you love to welcome them thus without the least effort. But this is not

the summit of art; it is only its happiness. Here we have a proof that the creation of works of art is beset with the same risks as are births in a family, where we find children so luckily favoured as to be born beautiful and without hurt to their mother, children on whom everything smiles, who succeed in everything; and just as there are flowers of genius, so there are these blossoms of love. This *brio* (an untranslatable Italian word which we are beginning to use) is characteristic of early works. It springs from the headiness and high mettle of youthful, untamed talent which is found again later on during certain happy hours; but this *brio* then no longer springs from the artist's heart, and, instead of throwing it into his work as a volcano flings up its fire, he is passive beneath its sway, he owes it to circumstances —to love, to rivalry, often to hatred, or yet again to the need for keeping up his reputation. . . . The writing of *la Cousine Bette* followed on Balzac's return from Italy, and he wanted to turn his travels to account.

Because a young man whom Mme. Marneffe is bent on leading captive happens to be Polish, he says, 'There is something childish about the Slav, as with all primitively savage peoples

[are not all peoples primitively savage ?], when they have overflowed among the civilised nations without being themselves really civilised. This race has spread like a flood and has covered a vast extent of the world. It inhabits deserts where the spaces are so vast that it is at ease there ; they do not jostle together as in Europe, and civilisation is impossible without the continual interaction of minds and of interests. The Ukraine, Russia, the plains of the Danube—the Slav people, in short—is a link between Europe and Asia, between civilisation and barbarism. Thus the Poles, the richest section of the Slav people, have the characteristic childishness and inconsistency of nations still in their callow youth. . . .’ Thereafter follows a summary of the history of Poland which restriction of space forbids me to quote.

This sort of thing is continual. Because Cousine Bette happens to have a sculptor friend, we get the following observations : ‘ Sculpture, like playwriting, is at once the easiest and most difficult of all the arts [??] Michael Angelo, Michael Colombes, Jean Goujon, Phidias, Praxiteles, Polycletus, Pujet, Canova, and Albert Dürer stand as brothers beside Milton, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare,

Tasso, Homer, and Molière. There is such grandeur in the work that a single statue is enough to win immortality for its maker. . . . If Paganini . . . ' and there follow two further pages of reflections equally new, original, and relevant.

This perpetual commentary which accompanies Balzac's work is the most tiresome thing in the world. Balzac's works are like an edition annotated by a blundering, vulgar, and garrulous critic who has had the hardihood to insert his notes in the text, and the critic is in this case no other than Balzac himself. He has found champions to defend him. We have been told, for example, that the modern novelist, being a moralist, a psychologist, and a philosopher, should be allowed to expound as much as he narrates, and to make his work at once didactic and epic. The claim implies a confusion of kinds. The writer who sets out to tell a story ought not to wander off into discussions, at the risk of making his tale wearisome, besides being mongrel and ambiguous in form. The writer who sets out to instruct should never indulge in story-telling, save as a means of bringing proofs to bear in support of the thing he is teaching, and this should be

done by short, concise, and carefully chosen examples, lest his teaching be lost sight of, just as in the other case the story-telling is overlooked.

Why not mingle the two kinds ? Is it so easy to distinguish between them ? Because by mixing the two together both are weakened and the final effect falls flat. And another reason is that by coming forward himself in the midst of his story, the author obtrudes and seems too anxious lest he should be overlooked ; and by displaying such an overweening interest in his own creations he seems to say, ' Aren't they rather curious, rather original, and rather representative of a certain social class, of a certain period, and of a certain temperament ? ' And all that is for us to say and not for him, and we do not like to hear it from his lips ; the novelist who proceeds in this fashion may perhaps assume some authority as a thinker, but in Balzac's case it is quite otherwise, and merely detracts from his effectiveness as a teller of tales.

Yet another objection is that if he intrudes in support of an argument, he is immediately suspected of having drawn his people and planned his story with this end in view, while subordinating everything to that end, and we

reject his claims as observer and historian. He is just like a historian who upholds a special theory, and is straight away suspected of garbling his facts. It is at once assumed of the novelist with a purpose that he has observed nothing but what will support the theory with which he set out, or what will conveniently fall in with that theory. Though this is quite untrue of Balzac, no observer having ever been more attentive, obedient, and loyal to the thing observed than was he, yet he behaves throughout as though it were quite otherwise with him, and we have the right to expect him, far more than a lesser man, to avoid this blundering, and to content himself with his observation and insight, since in these alone he has so much wealth. There is at bottom a good deal of truth in the whimsical saying of M. Anatole France, 'Poets do not think.' I would add, with certain reserves which will appear later—'nor should they do so.' They should be deeply moved and should make us share their emotion. Undoubtedly there are poets whose poetry is the outcome of thought. There is such a thing as philosophical poetry, in which the poet's emotion springs from an idea, and it is the emotion of this idea that he communi-

cates. And yet even a non-philosophical poet should think before writing, reflect on many things, shuffle and re-weld a multitude of ideas ; but when he comes to writing, his business is no longer to think but to feel, or rather he should only begin writing after his thinking is over, and when emotion masters him, it being quite understood at the same time that this man who is speaking is one who has added to his stature, grown finer and more ripe by the many ideas which have passed through his mind. And when we come to the story-teller, the novelist, the epic-writer, I claim that the stress of his thinking should have made a bigger, stronger, and more fruitful man of him ; but that when he writes he should leave his thinking on one side, and be entirely possessed by the creatures of his brain, seeing them too vividly and following them too ardently in the unfolding of their lives to spare any thought for himself, any reflection, any room for general ideas or discussion of problems ; he should be too much enslaved also by his own narrative—that is to say, by the peremptory logic of facts and by the begetting of events each the offspring of others, and begetting them in turn—to have any time for pondering on

anything else whatever save this logic and this fertility.

The author whose narrative is thus cut to pieces by journalistic articles gives me the impression that he writes six pages of his novel, goes for a walk, picks up a thought on which he happens, and jots it down on returning because it seems to him to be interesting ; or else he makes me think that, after having written his novel, he started flirting with general ideas, grasped hold of some of them, and set them down on the manuscript of his novel. But I ought, by your leave, in reading a novel, rather to get the impression that the author wrote it just as I read it, in a single draft without any vacillation or turning back, borne away and consumed by his subject ; and I ought moreover to believe that, on re-reading his finished work, he was still held fascinated, solely by the creatures of his brain. I should rather say that only that novel is a good one in which I never give a thought to its writer, and that an author spoils it when he leads me to think of him.

And a novelist, like an epic poet—and I do not see why novelists should be exempt from the law to which epic poets have always been

subject—should only think through the minds of his characters, and ought not to put his own thoughts into their mouths. Can you conceive Virgil setting forth his notions on the immortality of the soul, the transmigration of souls, the penalties or rewards of the beyond, and the life of the universe. He does so indeed, but by means of a narrative and of conversations between Anchises and his son. The novelist himself should never speak.

Need I say that Balzac has too surely the instinct of his craft not to have submitted often to this law, and that he has very often embodied his ideas in the speech of his characters (*Médecin de Campagne, Curé de Village, Illusions perdues*) ? And yet he often overlooked this law of which he was so well aware. A novelist himself should never speak.

Such was the theory of Flaubert, and in his work we shall find perhaps no more than a single personal reflection, ' Thus went on, before these cheerful commonplace people, half a century of servitude'; such was the theory of de Maupassant; and it seems to me that they were right, and that their novels as they made them in nowise tend to prove them wrong. And the fact that Balzac, by his own great trespassing,

warned off the great artists who followed him from likewise going astray, and gave them a holy horror of the writer who obtrudes himself on the story he is telling, is just one of my reasons for being grateful to him. Do you recall Boileau's line on Homer?—

Each line, each word speeds onward to the event.

It would be hard to find a more ridiculous line, nor could anything be less characteristic of Homer than the thought which it contains, the real truth of the matter being quite the reverse. And yet, had Boileau meant to say that the march of Homer's narrative, although slow and winding, is never interrupted, that though there are passages that are long drawn out, there is never any turning aside, and that the author never indulges in personal reflections —had he meant no more than that, he would have been quite right. Our nineteenth-century Homer is very different, and his person is singularly obtrusive.

It was a fault inherent in his very temperament, in the strong individuality which he could never put aside, in his liking for thrashing everything out in interminable talk, in his garrulity, and in his incorrigible weakness for

appearing before the footlights. Certainly he yielded himself entirely to his subject, as well as being wholly given up to his characters and to his narrative, though never to the extent of self-effacement; and the man who by nature should have been best able to avoid the pitfall of personal obtrusion in his work, is just the man who fell into it the oftenest. The art of composition which was his suffered great hurt from his stumbling.

## V

## HIS CHARACTERS

IT is as a creator of beings that are alive with vital strength, and in this sort the peer of Homer, Shakespeare, and Molière, that Balzac showed his outstanding greatness; and this quality being both the rarest and finest of an artist's equipment and throwing into the back-ground every flaw or failing, he has made a great impression on his fellow-mortals, and achieved a fame that remains unmarred by the onslights of time.

He had a singular gift for observing—not perhaps so very much greater than that of many others, even inferior, I should say, to the faculty possessed by La Bruyère or Saint-Simon, and yet, when all is said, very great indeed—a gift which was in no way burdened or blunted by bookish memories, a gift which allowed Balzac the very rare privilege of looking on everything and everybody with freshly opened eyes: but above and beyond

everything else he had an imagination which, starting from the slightest observation and following it up with sedulous fidelity, drew from it such fulness of meaning that it became a poem, rich, varied, and full of life.

He really had imagination, the thing in itself, and not the shallow counterpart that fulfils itself in words, which creates metaphors, laboriously builds up symbols ; but the genuine imagination that creates things, living people, and events.

Things : since the things which he describes take on a distinct physiognomy, a life, and a soul, he can show us a house as 'a state of mind,' just as Amiel saw landscape. One house is a resigned misery ; another has the air of a dumb tomb crammed with gold ; another stands for open-heartedness of a gentle and rather sleepy kind ; another is pompous and overbearing pride ; and yet another is slyness and double-dealing personified in stone.

Living people : since the men and women whom he shows us are just as familiar as the living people whom we meet with daily, nay, they are more so, and—here is the proof of it—we see in them not merely what he shows us, but even the things that he withholds ; we

know on what errands they have been speeding without his guidance, and what thoughts have come to them even when he leaves these unrevealed, and what words they have spoken when he has not thought it his duty to set down their speech for us. They are beings whom we know so thoroughly that we are ourselves able to reconstitute and reconstruct the parts which he has not shown us, just as I have a sure knowledge of the childhood of Achilles, the youth of Iago or of Tartuffe, even though Homer, Shakespeare, and Molière have told me nothing about them.

Events : since in Balzac an event is nearly always the outcome of the inexorable interplay of successive factors, dominated by a mind that commands the whole of them, embracing all, and with such complete mastery that in him alone it seems to have both life and dwelling, like Minerva in the brain of Jove.

He thus dwelt in a world which he begat from his observation even when it was fleeting, a world entirely of his own fashioning, of whose life and action he was the source. Logical, complete, and lifelike creatures sprang from his brain and moved before his eyes as they now move before ours. And they acted, every

one of them, with the inevitable speech and the inevitable deed befitting their temperament, education, or environment, with the character proper to their breeding or constitution, with habits suiting their character, notions suiting these habits, words proper to their ideas and deeds to their language ; full, solid, completely put together and set going, some of them most complex and others at times too simple (and this is a point to which we shall recur later),—but all alike alive and breathing.

This is the outstanding feature, and it is the one endowment essential to the artist : the feeling of life, and the power to produce the illusion of it.

This power which he possessed in so extraordinary a degree was strengthened and given fuller scope by his gift for seeing things and people *in detail*. It is not the same faculty. Artists so great as Corneille and Victor Hugo are without it. They can only create life that is ample and strong ; either they despise or they are insensible to the small things of life, and their contempt for them can only result from want of sensibility ; the watching or pursuit of slight and apparently insignificant clues is quite beyond them, though it is just

these which give both to beings and to things the special aspect by which we know them. To understand this properly, just think of what we ordinary everyday people are like. We say 'So-and-so seems a good sort,' or 'I don't like the look of What's-his-name.' We have a general impression, right enough perhaps, but a trifle vague. Now, the impression which we get is the outcome of a hundred details unconsciously absorbed. The great artist sees the whole of them, but picks out and sets down only the most telling, so that, *on meeting with each one*, we exclaim, 'How true that is ! I've noticed the same thing.' But we have not really noticed it ; we have only glimpsed it, and not until the artist reveals it to us does the detail stand out, at his bidding, from the background of our darkened memory.

Perhaps no one ever had such a faculty of impressive observation, of tenacious and illuminative memory, as was Balzac's. That was enough to make him a great novelist ; but it was not all. He had the gift of seeing in his mind and bringing into life there ensembles, groups of humanity, almost organised societies with the action and reaction of its various individuals on each other. And this is an

absolutely higher endowment. The number of those who have been thus gifted is soon counted. Shakespeare and Molière are the most illustrious. Wielding this power, the novelist becomes a kind of epic poet; not merely does he create life, not merely does he surprise it in the most trivial of his characteristic details, but he embraces the ample whole, and each creature of his brain, though already living, is nourished into fuller life by contact, interaction, and impulse from the life of all the others. A world has been created of which Balzac was neither more nor less than creator. When *la Comédie Humaine* occurred to Balzac as a general title for all his works (exclusive of his 'prentice tales), it was due to nothing else than an attack of megalomania or the idea of a smart tradesman; and yet he saw a truth (though he exaggerated it to a fanciful degree), the real truth being that his characters, always living in his mind, and hence reappearing from novel to novel, older or younger, in different circumstances or different surroundings, but with a recognisable basis of the personal mannerism or commonplace proper to them, do indeed form a society, a people, a nation which is almost real, just as for the poets of

antiquity the gods of Olympus are a race of individuals with distinct characters which they preserve throughout all their various vicissitudes, and of which their dealings one with another serve only to accentuate the moral aspect. Balzac felt that he had created his own special mythology, and in that he was quite right. He created a real living world, limited indeed, and far from fulfilling the showman's title that he gave it, but yet a real world that within its own limits was alive with intense life. It is a pity that Molière, his peer as a creator of a living world of men and women, did not pursue the careers of his various characters from one piece to another, so that we might have seen Chrysale in the guise of an elder Sganarelle (in *l'École des Maris*), Tartuffe as an elderly Don Juan, and so on. But perhaps I am going astray.

Just as La Bruyère had done more rarely (in *le Riche et le Pauvre*), and just as Molière was so fond of doing (in the portrait of Tartuffe by Dorine), with a fondness which, unfortunately for us, he might very well have forgone, since he placed his characters in flesh and blood on the boards of a theatre, Balzac set himself first of all to the visualisation of his characters

in their physical aspect, down to the smallest detail. Then he gave them a name, under the delusion that there is some analogy between a man's name and his character; but quite rightly persuaded that certain names stir up ideas which are gratified on discovering that their bearers happen to fit them perfectly. Next, he sought from out of his memory or he invented a dwelling that should exactly fit the character which he saw before him, a dwelling that should explain the character, and by whom it should in turn be explained. Then he wrought on the character already conceived, as a well-informed psychologist who was at the same time very clever in filling up the gaps in his knowledge by guesswork, founded on the hints which he got from what he already knew; and a man who can do this has mastered the logic of his characters. And last of all, he set about the real work proper to the novelist, by *inventing* such events as would put his character in proper relation to his chosen scene, and he *deduced* such events as were the necessary or probable outcome of the character with whom he was dealing.

He saw, as I have said, his creation physically down to the smallest detail, but with an

essential outstanding feature which gave to it a special unity or mark, and he knew how to drive this home and mark it indelibly in the reader's mind. This can hardly be properly shown save by examples. Mme. Vauquer, the boarding-house proprietress : ' Soon the widow appears, decked in a bonnet from under which there peeps a draggled wisp of hair ; she traipses along in her crinkled slippers. Her plump but withered face from the midst of which stands out a nose like a parrot's beak ; her plump little hands, her body as sleek and well-favoured as a church rat, her bodice ready to burst and shifting as she moves, are all in keeping with that room where misfortune oozes out and speculation cowers, and where Mme. Vauquer breathes the stuffy and unwholesome air without being sickened by it. Her face chill as the first autumnal frost, her wrinkled eyes whose expression varies from the simper of a ballet-girl to the sharp frown of the money-changer, in short her whole person explains the boarding-house, as the boarding-house implies her person. The faded plumpness of this little woman is just as consequent on the life she leads as is typhus from the exhalations of a hospital.'

‘ Old Mlle. Michonneau wore above her eyes a filthy shade of green taffety, rimmed with iron-wire, which would have frightened away the very angel of pity ; her shawl, with its thin and weeping fringes, seemed to cloak a skeleton, so many-cornered were the features it covered. What acid had eaten away all her feminine contours ? She must once have been quite pretty. Was it vice, or sorrow, or cupidity ? Had she loved too well, had she been a dealer in ladies’ left-off clothing, or merely a courtesan ? Her blank look was chilling, her wizened face threatening ; she had the shrill voice of the grasshopper screeching in its bush at the approach of winter.’

What gives that portrait its unity, what gathers it all up into a single impression, a single feeling, is the idea of chilliness. She herself is cold under clothes as ‘ slender ’ as herself ; she is like a skeleton ; she is eaten away as by an acid ; her wan look is like cold water or frosted mica ; her voice is chilling, sharp, and shrill as that of a grasshopper ; but as a grasshopper reminds you of summer, the author hastens to add ‘ at the approach of winter ’ (which, by the way, is wrong, for at the approach of winter grasshoppers are dead).

Mlle. Michonneau is as gaunt and skinny and sharp and chilly as winter. She is winter's blast itself.

' M. Poiret was a kind of mechanism. On seeing him stretching himself out like a grey shadow in a walk at the Zoological Gardens, wearing on his head a limp cap, scarcely grasping his walking-stick, with a yellowing book in his hand, the faded lappets of his over-coat floating loose and ill concealing almost empty breeches and blue-hosed spindle-shanks that shook like a drunkard's, and showing his dingy white waistcoat and his coarse crumpled muslin shirt-frill that matched but ill with the black tie round his scraggy turkey neck, many people wondered whether that Chinese shadow really belonged to the hardy seed of Japheth's sons that went hovering over the Boulevard des Italiens. What sort of work was it that had shrivelled him up like that ? What had he been ? Why, no doubt a clerk in some office. . . . '

This is the portrait of a man that has never been anything more than a mere cog-wheel. The very first word shows it : ' He was a kind of mechanism.' All the rest refers and brings us back to that. Physically, he is but a shadow;

he takes up but little room, and slips between two layers of air so closely that they are hardly disturbed by his passing. He exists as little as may be, having never been more than an almost futile sheet flattened down between two other sheets in the social book. His dress is not wholly careless ; but it is old-fashioned and piteous ; old-fashioned, for no change in social position ever led the wearer to alter it ; piteous, for his poverty forbids its renewal, and his physiological wretchedness appears through it and brings home to him his guilt. A social waif who remains neat and not without a certain dignity (as witnessed by his shirt-frill), but pitiful and, above all, ridiculous.

‘ Though Mlle. Victorine Taillefer had a sickly whiteness like that of young girls suffering from chlorosis, and though she was connected with the general suffering that formed the background of this picture, by a habitual sadness, a worried face, a poor and weakly air, she had, notwithstanding all this, a face that was not old, and a voice and movements that were lively enough. Her young sorrow seemed like a shrub with its leaves turned yellow from having been newly planted in uncongenial soil. Her reddish physiognomy [badly written, for

it was not her physiognomy which was reddish but her face itself], her tawny fair hair, her too slender waist, expressed the sort of grace which modern poets find in statues of the Middle Ages. Her dark grey eyes expressed Christian meekness and resignation. Her simple and inexpensive clothing betrayed her youthful contours. Had she been happy she would have been quite ravishing ; happiness is woman's poetry. Had the joy of a ball reflected its rosy hues on that face turned pale already ; had the softness of good living smoothed out her shrunken cheeks and made them ruddy instead ; had love given life anew to her melancholy eyes, Victorine might have matched the finest of belles.'

The key to the understanding of the text is here the likening of Victorine to a shrub newly transplanted into uncongenial soil, the leaves of which have turned yellow. Victorine has fortuitous bad health. Red-haired and dark-eyed, she is at bottom of robust health ; she is pretty and well-shaped ; but poverty transplanted her into an unhealthy dwelling ; she is withering away ; slender as she is, she is becoming still more markedly so ; pretty, she is losing the distinction of her features ; though

winning, she is without mirth; you might almost say that her beauty has turned inward. She has none of that outward blossoming which is only begotten of happiness or the illusion of it. In years to come she will be a Mlle. Michonneau, and the shade with the iron-wire will welcome her dark grey eyes after long weeping. She is a shrub newly transplanted into uncongenial soil, that is all; the description of this girl can all be referred back to that definition, charming, moreover, in its wistful melancholy.

‘ Mr. Vautrin, a man of forty, was one of those people of whom it is said, “ He ‘s an awfully fine fellow.” He had broad shoulders, a well-developed chest, muscles that stood out, hands that were thick and square, and his knuckles were remarkable for the thick red hairs that grew on them in tufts. His face furrowed by premature wrinkles suggested a harshness which his simple and affable ways belied. His bass voice, harmonising with his coarse cheerfulness, was not displeasing. He was obliging and fond of laughing. If a lock went wrong, he soon took it to pieces, mended, oiled, and fitted it together again, saying, “ That ‘s my hobby.” For he knew everything: ships, the sea, France, foreign countries, business, men,

events, the law, hotels, and prisons. If any one made any show of a grievance he at once offered his services. He had several times lent money to Mme. Vauquer and to some of her boarders, but those whom he had obliged would rather have died than not pay him back, so much did he impress them with fear, in spite of his good-natured air, by the deep and resolute glance that he gave them. The way in which he would spit out saliva bespoke an imperturbable self-control which would never allow him to shrink even from the committal of a crime to get himself out of a tight corner. Like a stern judge, his eye seemed to fathom the depths of every question, of every conscience, of every feeling. . . . He knew or he guessed the affairs of everybody about him, whilst no one could fathom either his thoughts or his occupations. Although he had set up his seeming good nature, his never-failing kindness and gaiety, as a barrier between himself and others, yet the appalling depth of his character would often break through it and stand revealed.'

Vautrin is a bandit, and yet a man of powerful intelligence and will. But for the proper conduct of his story it is necessary that the author should avoid saying so at the outset.

That is why he introduces him at first only as a man who is *disquieting*. He is physically strong and robust, and fit for endurance. He is a good sort of fellow, cheerful, always jolly and comforting. You cannot help finding him attractive. You are grateful to him for his good health, and that is only human. But he is unfathomable ; nobody knows anything about him, nor what he does, and people more wideawake than those at the Vauquer pension would have got uneasy about it ; still, they are all of them unconsciously somewhat awe-stricken, not so much from their knowing nothing about him as for the feeling they have that he guesses every one of their thoughts. He has, moreover, a certain deep and penetrating glance and a certain harshness in his face when not smiling, which compare oddly with his accommodating ways, and which would certainly in less sluggish minds raise a suspicion that they were not genuine. To finish up with, he is rather too clever at undoing locks. All these traits go to make up the *disquieting character*, not merely for the boarders, but also for the reader, by inducing him to suspect a freebooter, which is just what the author wants. For the moment the portrait is com-

plete ; thenceforward we have the idea of a man at once energetic and clever, resolute and cunning, self-controlled, self-assured, without prejudices or foibles, who can hardly be anything else than a criminal or a detective. This portrait in subdued colour, drawn with broad lines both skilful and deep, is surprisingly fine.

A miser in his own room : ‘Would you have a clear notion of that pale leaden-hued face (which I would term *moonlike* if only the Academy would allow<sup>1)</sup>) ? It looked like tarnished silver-gilt. The hair of my miser was straight, nicely combed, and of an ashy grey colour. His features, impassive as those of Talleyrand, seemed as though they had been cast in bronze. His small eyes, yellow as those of a weasel, had scarcely any lashes, and light hurt them ; but the peak of an old cap screened them from it. His pointed nose was so pitted at the end with smallpox that you might have likened it to a gimlet. He had thin lips like those of the alchemists and small old men painted by Rembrandt or Metzu. He spoke

<sup>1</sup> False note. I understand quite well that Balzac calls it *moonlike* because it is pale and leaden-hued ; but a *moonlike face* must always bring to mind a round and beaming one, whereas the face of a miser (as that of Balzac’s here) is just the reverse.

in a low, mild voice, and never lost his temper. His age was problematical : it was impossible to know whether he had grown old before his time or whether he had spared his youth so that it might always prove useful to him. Everything was neat and shabby in his bedroom, which, from the green tablecloth on the writing-desk down to the carpet near the bed, looked like the chill sanctuary of those poor spinsters who spend their lives in polishing their furniture. In winter the logs on his hearth, for ever buried under a heap of ashes, smouldered without ever blazing up. All his movements, from the very hour of his getting up to his fits of coughing at night, were as regular as the ticking of a clock. . . . Touch a wood-louse when it is running across a piece of paper, and it stops and pretends to be dead. In the same way he would stop short in his speech and say nothing when a carriage rattled by, so as not to strain his voice. Just as Fontenelle, he was sparing of vital activity, and concentrated every human feeling on his own self. And his life slipped by, producing no more stir than the sand in an ancient hour-glass. It would sometimes happen that his victims made a great deal of fuss and browbeat

him ; but subsequently everything would relapse into silence, like a kitchen after the killing of a duck. Towards evening this human bank-note became an ordinary man, and his coins became a human heart. Were he well satisfied with his day's work, he would rub his hands, letting off all through the crinkled lines of his face a sort of cheery perspiration, for it is impossible otherwise to express the silent play of his muscles which gave outward seeming to a sensation comparable to the empty laugh of *Bas de cuir*. Lastly, even in his most joyous transports his conversation remained monosyllabic and his expression of face entirely null.'

The main feature of that wonderful portrait lies in the power of silence. Gobseck keeps silent ; that is the first and chiefest indication of his strength. Gobseck keeps silent ; his thin and close-drawn lips keep silent, his very words are silent, for monosyllables make silence much more marked than uttered sounds ; his laugh is silent, his steps and movements must be so as well, and in the gravest ordeals, when the victim is brought to bay and stands cowed, silence in both victim and executioner seems to cleave the air like a blade. This room is the

dwelling not exactly of the silence of death, but of deadly silence.

Notice the difference between him and Grandet. Gobseck and Grandet are undoubtedly of the same kindred. Now Grandet talks and stammers and stutters, but still he talks, and a good deal too. Gobseck does not. Why is this so ? Because Grandet is a miser, and, when needs be, a usurer, but he is above all a greedy speculator : he drives bargains, nay he spends all his life in doing nothing but that, and a bargain-driver must talk without ever even tiring, and at the same time in an artificially difficult way so as to perplex and weary his adversary. Gobseck drives no bargains. He lends money at such and such a rate. This being settled, he has only got to fight and carry the day by obstinacy, unconquerable obstinacy and chilly silence, by his *yes*, *no*, *if*, and *what I said*, by the impassiveness of his features and his impenetrable mask, all of which are the very shapes of irresistible stubbornness. Just as Grandet must speak, so Gobseck must be silent.

Now see the physical likenesses of the same woman at various ages following on events which have modified her. Cousin Bette when

she was twenty-five: 'At first when she fostered hopes, the secret of which she never shared with a soul, she made up her mind to wear corsets, to follow the fashion, and she became for a time so smart that the baron thought her marriageable. Lisbeth was then the "attractive brunette" of the old-fashioned French novel. Her piercing eyes, her olive-hued complexion, her reed-like waist could tempt a major on half-pay; but she used to say with a laugh that her own admiration was quite enough for her. . . .'

When she was forty-five: 'In course of time she had fallen into queer old-maidish ways. For instance, instead of bowing to fashion, she would have it suit her own foibles and comply with her own obsolete fads. If the baroness gave her a pretty new hat, or any dress of fashionable cut, Cousin Bette would at once pull it to pieces and spoil it by making it into something which partook both of the Imperial style and the olden Lorrain costumes. . . . She held herself as upright as a stick. Now an ungraceful woman goes for nothing at Paris. And then that dark hair, those beautiful stern eyes, the rigid lines of her face, that Calabrian dryness of complexion gave Cousin

Bette the appearance of one of Giotto's portraits (and all these things a true Parisienne would have turned to good account); her bearing above all made her look so odd that she sometimes resembled those monkeys dressed like women which the little Savoyard urchins carry about with them.'

At both ages the central, the outstanding characteristic is her dryness, stiffness, and lack of grace. At both ages we are concerned with some one who has never known the milk of human kindness; although by lapse of time her dryness has become more marked, her stiffness more unyielding, her piercing look has turned into the beautiful stern glance, and the olive-hued complexion into the Calabrian ochre; if you add to this the eccentricity of her dress, which bespeaks a restive and stubborn character, the portrait of the 'old goat' first sketched as the young kid is seen to be complete.

Then there is Monsieur Goriot at sixty-two, rich and happy and glad to be alive; and *Old Goriot* at sixty-five or six, ruined, broken down, and worn away with grief.

First of all Monsieur Goriot: 'Goriot arrived, provided with a well-furnished ward-

robe, the magnificent outfit proper to a merchant who need stint himself of nothing on retiring from business. Madame Vauquer had admired the dozen and a half fine Holland linen shirts, whose fineness was the more noticeable from the fact that the manufacturer of vermicelli wore on his shirt-front two diamond-studded pins joined together by a little chain. Habitually dressed in bottle-blue clothes, he had every day a new white quilted waistcoat under which his pear-shaped and prominent stomach fluctuated, swaying to and fro a massive gold chain hung with trinkets. His snuff-box, likewise of gold, had a locket of hair inset, and this gave him the air of being an amorous adventurer. When his hostess accused him of being a dandy, he let the happy smile of the *bourgeois* whose vanity has been flattered hover on his lips.'

He stands for the well-to-do and vulgar *bourgeois*. He was, and is still, very fond of fine linen, of the dress of the upper Parisian classes, what is worn on the boulevards and in the Bois, white waistcoats, since, requiring to be changed every day, they denote a certain affluence and lack of care for economy; and what the true dandy forbids himself, namely,

jewellery, which is synonymous with vain ostentation, and which are like signs put out to attract attention and respect. He has them *all*: the heavy, gold chain, the trinkets, the diamond scarf-pins, the golden snuff-box with the locket. He carries on his own person this small fortune which lets all the world know that he is the owner of a much larger one. It is done a little for people to know about it, and still more for himself to be reminded of it. He regards his trinkets or snuff-box much as he would a looking-glass. Everything about him says, 'I am rich and always afraid of letting go opportunities of being reminded of it.' Moreover, though abstemious at this time, he is already stout, 'as healthy as your eye,' says a friend of Mme. Vauquer, 'a man who bears his years wonderfully well, and whom a woman may still find very agreeable'; and again, 'his conspicuous fleshy calf as well as his long flat nose, gave a hint of moral qualities which the widow was loath to let go, and this impression was strengthened by the moon-like ingenuous face of the good man. Every morning the barber from the Polytechnic School used to come to trim and powder his hair.' This was the middle-class *bourgeois* under

Louis Philippe, who aimed at being of the upper classes and aped their ways.

Now let us see *Old Goriot* : ‘ Three years afterwards Old Goriot appeared one day without his powder ; an exclamation of surprise slipped from his landlady on seeing the colour of his hair : it was a dirty greenish grey. His physiognomy, which secret griefs had insensibly saddened day by day, seemed the most desolate of all those that lined her table. . . . When his underclothing was worn out, he bought calico at sevenpence the ell to replace his fine linen. His diamonds, his gold snuff-box, his jewels disappeared one by one. He had left off his bright blue clothes and all his rich apparel to wear summer and winter alike a frock-coat of coarse brown cloth, a suit of goat’s hair, and grey sheepskin trousers. He grew gradually thinner ; his calves fell in, his face swollen with a good middle-class content, became unduly wrinkled, his forehead furrowed, and the outlines of his jaw sharpened. He no longer looked like himself. The honest manufacturer of vermicelli who at sixty-two did not look forty, the big stout tradesman brimming over with nonsensical banter, whose sprightly bearing rejoiced the passers-by, who

had something youthful in his smile—this man seemed to have suddenly become a dull faded tottering septuagenarian. His blue eyes, once so vivacious, assumed lifeless iron-grey tints, they had grown dim, they no longer watered, and their red rims seemed to weep blood. He was an object of horror to some, of pity to others. Young medical students, noticing the depression of his lower lip and measuring the apex of his facial angle, declared him affected with idiocy, after having worried him a long time without getting anything out of him. . . .

All the features of this latter portrait, in direct opposition to the former, aim at showing physiological misery as effect and sign of its moral counterpart. Emaciation, wrinkling of the forehead, of the cheeks, of the flesh on the jaws; face turned leathery; instead of the fleshy and plump calf which implies a firm step, the tottering gait of M. Poiret. There is no feature directly indicating disease properly so called, none that suggests the idea of a deep moral affection gnawing and slowly devastating. The last word is nothing but the exaggeration of a perfectly accurate bit of observation and sums up the whole piece. The young students declare Goriot affected with idiocy

because he really is so concerning one of those fixed ideas which, though not leading to idiocy, have all the appearance of doing so.

Note well the first word : Goriot without his powder. This before all the rest ; first because suppressing powder was one of the earliest retrenchments, one of the earliest sacrifices Goriot imposed on himself ; then, and above all, because this change was the only one that was abrupt and sudden, the only one which caught the attention of his fellow-boarders among all those others which had gone by almost unnoticed, so that they now said, ' It 's sure enough ; these last three years he has certainly altered a good deal, he has grown thinner, and lost his colour, and shrivelled up,' and so on to the same effect.

As to his effect on those who surround him—which makes the portrait complete, for one is what one *can* be, but to the reader the impression made by a being on those about him is a most precious, even a most precise piece of information—as to his effect upon the people around him, it reads as follows : ' He had fallen into a brooding state which those who observed him superficially mistook for senile sluggishness. Everybody in the boarding-house had

fixed ideas about the poor old man. He never had either wife or daughter. Over-indulgence in pleasure had made a snail of him, an anthropomorphous mollusc worthy of being entered among the *cap-bearers*, as one of the museum attendants used to say. Poiret was an eagle, a gentleman when compared with Goriot. Poiret spoke, argued, answered, though he meant nothing as he spoke, argued, or answered, for he would repeat in different words what the others had been saying ; still he took part in the conversation ; he was alive, he seemed to be sensitive ; whilst Old Goriot—again as the museum attendant used to say—was for ever zero by the thermometer.'

In one word—and to make use of the pithy and perfectly apt popular phrase—Goriot is *absorbed*. Something draws him inward and forbids all expansion, all motion outward, however slight it may be. He is no longer ‘sensible’ of external influences ; neither does he seem to be alive. He is beyond genuine and recognised imbecility. For an imbecile is passive ; when one strikes him, he reverberates ; when one speaks to him, he answers back like an echo ; he is passive and no more. Goriot is not even passive ; he is no longer in

contact with external objects ; all communication between the world and himself is, as it were, cut off. Why is this so ? The boarders at Vauquer's answer each in their own way ; the reader wonders about it most anxiously, and that is why the portrait is both very curious in itself and extremely clever as an introduction to the novel and an invitation to read it.

After Balzac had *seen* his character, he loved to *label* him with a characteristic name. He was very keen about it, thought of it a long time beforehand, consulting sign-boards on the shops, and we know how happy he felt when he found precisely on a sign-board the name of Z. Marcas, and when he at once imagined a deformed, suffering, unhappy being, ill-starred in all his undertakings. ““How ! ”” said Mme. de Listonnière to him. . . . Here the historian would be well within his rights in sketching the portrait of this lady ; but he thought that those who were ignorant of Sterne's cognosmological system could hardly pronounce those three words, *Mme. de Listonnière*, without picturing the woman to themselves as being aristocratic, dignified, and tempering the rigour of piety with elegant old monarchical and classical

habits and polite manners ; kind, though a little stiff, with a slightly nasal twang ; allowing herself the weakness of reading *la Nouvelle Héloïse* ; fond of theatre-going and yet doing her hair like a girl.' How much in three words ! What fine nonsensical language !

But, seriously, these surnames of his are nearly always well chosen. What is especially admirable is the combination of surname and Christian name and the effect which both together produce on the reader : *Eugénie Grandet*, an effect of a tender gentleness and the sensation of a dull, monotonous life ; a pearl-grey name ; *Ursule Mirouet*, the same effect with something a shade more ecclesiastical ; *Philippe Brideau*, a wonderful name for an old soldier, and *Joseph Brideau*, an excellent name for a sweet-tempered artist, so calm and homely ; *Colonel Chabert*, a magnificent name for a leader of dragoons ; *Baron Hulot*, an admirable name for an officer under the first Empire, which reminds the reader ever and again, amidst the frightful undermining of his character, of what *he was once*, and consequently of the tragic depth of his degradation ; I will say nothing about *Gobseck*, so characteristic as to tend towards caricature. Is not

*Lucien de Rubempré* the name of a charming, graceful, and weak-kneed fellow, and *Eugène de Rastignac* that of a daring, ardent, resolute, masterful, and unscrupulous one, whose victory is assured by the very name which he bears ? What of the duchesses called *Manfrigueuse* and the middle-class courtesans who are called *Valérie Marneffe* (a name that to me, however, seems more befitting a procuress ; still, she will turn her hand to that later on) ? What of the journalist *Lousteau* and the caricaturist *Bixiou*, and the doctors *Bianchon* and *Crevel*, bursting with vanity and self-importance ? I find none save Mme. de Mortsau whose name seems inapt, it being rather that of a haughty great lady, even perhaps of a courtesan, rather than that of a tender-hearted, pure, querulous, and broken-down creature. The truth is that it belongs to her husband. But he is a self-supposed invalid, and the name suits him no better.

But such misfits are rare. As a rule Balzac is infallible in this part of his art, which is by no means a negligible one. George Sand, too, was generally very happy in her choice of surnames.

The character being seen and named, Balzac

busied himself with his dwelling-place, being convinced (and rightly) that surroundings have a tremendous influence on temperament, and also that we choose our surroundings according to our temperament, and that we model and adapt our homes according to its bent, all of which furnishes ample reason for the close connection between our dwellings and ourselves. I said that Balzac rather overworks this idea, and that he often describes for the mere sake of doing so, with an artistic passion, poring over a country or a Paris house as devotedly as an archæologist might do over a figured monument to Eleusis. I said that to my mind he sees them too much, he is too strongly and too often taken up with them ; but still—and this is oftenest—it is in order to explain the man and make us understand him thoroughly that he minutely describes what, continually surrounding him, moulds him and is moulded by him in return, modifies and is modified in a certain way.

*Take the miser's house.* It is his house that Balzac insists on showing us before we are introduced to the miser himself. The shell accounts for the tortoise. ' You may find in certain country towns, houses the mere sight

of which inspires you with a melancholy equal to that induced by the most sombre cloisters, the most desolate wastes, or the saddest ruins. Such houses may shelter at once the silence of a cloister, the barrenness of a wilderness, and the strewn limbs of a ruin ; life and movement are so still inside that a stranger would think they were tenantless did he not all at once catch sight of the pale and chilly look of a motionless figure whose half-monastic face peeps out over the window-sill at the sound of unknown footsteps. These features of *melancholy* actually exist in the *physiognomy* of a dwelling situated at Saumur at the top of the street which leads uphill to the castle in the highest part of the town. This street, now quite deserted, stuffy in summer, cold in winter, dark in some places, is notable for the reverberance of its cobbled pavement, always dry and clean, and the narrowness of its winding way, and the stillness of its houses belonging to the older town and overlooking the ramparts. . . . After having toiled up the windings of this picturesque roadway, the least unevenness of which calls up memories and of which the general impression induces a kind of involuntary reverie, you perceive a fairly dark recess

in the midst of which is hidden the doorway of old Grandet's house.' This out-of-the-way street, this house set back from the main road which seems to be hidden from sight, this cloister-like, tomb-like, stern-looking house, where there sometimes appeared at the window the monastic face uneasy at the sound of unknown footsteps (so much has he got used to recognising the sound of customary ones), is the marvellous dwelling of everlasting suspicion, and, of course, of avarice.

*The house of the wise man* (which he did not build, scarcely modified, but which he picked out, so giving a sign of his turn of mind), the house of a not at all eccentric sage, with quite an ordinary, but pure, gentle, and sincere heart : 'The Loing meanders through the town, lined with terraced gardens and neat-looking houses the aspect of which tempts you to suppose that happiness must dwell there rather than anywhere else. When they turned from the High Street into the Rue des Bourgeois, Minoret-Levrault pointed out the property of M. Levrault, the rich Parisian iron-merchant who, as he said, had just allowed himself to die : "Look here, uncle, here 's a fine house for sale ; it has a lovely garden by the river." "Let us

go in," said the doctor, seeing at the end of a small paved courtyard a house squeezed between the walls of two neighbouring houses concealed by clumps of trees and creepers. "There are cellars," said the doctor, going up a steep flight of steps which was ornamented with white and blue crockery ware in which some geraniums were blossoming. Cut across, as most country houses are, by a passage leading from the yard on to the garden, the house had nothing on the right but a drawing-room lighted by four windows, two of them looking out on to the yard and two on to the garden; but Levrault-Levrault had appropriated one of them as an entry to a long greenhouse built up with bricks which led from the drawing-room to the river, ending there in an ugly Chinese summer-house. "Good! With a roof put over that greenhouse, and with boarding put down," said old Minoret, "I shall be able to arrange my library in here, and make that queer piece of architecture into a nice study." On the other side of the passage looking out on to the garden was a dining-room decorated in imitation black lacquer with green and gold flowers, and separated from the kitchen by the staircase. A small pantry

had been let into the back of the staircase leading to the kitchen, the iron-barred windows of which looked out on to the yard. There were two rooms on the first floor and above them some quite inhabitable attics. After having made a rapid survey of this house covered with green trellis-work from top to bottom, both back and front, and ending on the river-side in a wide terrace laden with delft vases . . .'

It is in just such a middle-class house, commonplace, but comely and cheerful, that you can fancy Doctor Minoret playing endless games of backgammon with the parish priest, and the retired colonel, and his niece falling in love with M. de Portenduin on seeing him gracefully shaving on the other side of the street.

*A poor doctor's flat.* The reception-room for patients was meanly furnished with the common-looking mahogany sofa, trimmed with yellow-flowered Utrecht velvet, four armchairs, six chairs, a console, and a tea-table. . . . The clock for ever under its glass-globe between two Egyptian candlesticks was shaped like a lyre. You wondered how the curtains hanging at the windows had been able to hold together

so long ; for they were yellow calico painted with red roses, from the factory at Jouy. . . . The other room served as dining-room. The decent penury that reigned here in this room that was deserted for half the day, was obvious as soon as you set foot in it, at sight of the small red muslin curtains lining the window which looked out on to the yard. The cupboards obviously hid remains of mouldy pies, chipped plates, everlasting corks, and serviettes dirty from a whole week's usage.'

Having seen, named, and lodged his characters, and given them their proper setting, he endows them with life. How ? It is just there that criticism stops short, almost quite at a loss. How can any one define the gift of a Homer, an *Æschylus*, a *Sophocles*, a *Euripides* (though to a lesser degree), a *Shakespeare*, a *Corneille*, a *Racine*, a *Molière*, a *La Bruyère* now and then, a *Goethe* at times, an *Augier* and a *Dumas* the younger at times again, an *Ibsen* often. When their creations are not only true, accurate, precise, and great, but just as spirited and to the full as living as we know that our neighbours or our own kindred actually are ; a *Ulysses*, an *Electra*, an *Antigone*, an *Iphigenia*, an *Othello*, a *Pauline*, a *Phèdre*,

and a Joad, a Tartuffe, a Giton, a Werther, a M. Poirier, a Mme. Guichard, a Nora, and a Borckmann ? No one knows ; for it is not the secret of art, it is that of physiological instinct and power which consists in transforming ourselves into another being and leading inside that other the same life as our own self does—following the same passionate impulses and obeying the same logic which overrules feelings and passions. Now, that is a gift which is beyond analysis.

Massillon used to say : ‘Where do I study the passions which I describe ? Why, in my own self.’ Flaubert said : ‘Who is Mme. Bovary ? She is myself.’ It is certain that you cannot bestow life ; you are alive, that is all ; and when a character of your creation has life it is *yourself* who have endowed him with your own. But how can, and how is that done in fact ? That is just what the life-giver himself would be at a loss to explain, and that is yet another reason and a stronger why it is futile for criticism to attempt it.

For criticism, at the most, can only detect a few ways, a few habits, a few processes which reveal *a part* only of that strange work, but which are, if I may say so, but outward and

superficial as regards it, and such as when detected do not reach down to the depths from which they come.

Such, for example, is the striking word that, all of a sudden, flashes a full light on the depths of a character.

When Colonel Chabert, after years spent sunk in misery, receives two louis from the solicitor, his first word is, 'Now at last I shall be able to smoke cigars.'

Some one says to Rubempré: 'If you keep on being eclectic no one will support you, either Liberal or Royalist. You must choose; on which side will you stand?' 'Which is the stronger?' says Rubempré quite bluntly, so bluntly in fact that his questioner is not at all astonished, and dreams of nothing but explaining to him which is the stronger side.

Grandet to his nephew: 'Your father is dead.' Desperate cry from the nephew Grandet: '... But *that's nothing*; he went bankrupt and you haven't a penny.'

Mme. Marneff to Crevel: 'You don't love me this morning.' 'Don't I though, Valerie,' says Crevel. 'Why, I love you like a million!'

From a courtesan: 'Come on! Let us be gay, old boy! Life is like clothes. When they

are dirty we brush them up, when they get worn through we mend them ; but clothed we remain as long as we can.'

With fine words such as these Balzac abounds, and we must acknowledge that they give us the very impress of living truth. Yet do we not feel that, strictly speaking, logic alone would suffice for their finding—that, strictly speaking, an abstract idea might utter them just as well ?

Another process, or rather another manner, for an author who has succeeded in living inside another character, is to give that personage such and such habits of body, gesture, speech, or facial appearance as recur repeatedly in the same outward mannerisms or nearly so, thus marking (the only stumbling-block to be avoided being monotony) the secret connections which bind together body and soul, our movements and our instincts, our behaviour and our ordinary tasks, our familiar gestures and our customary thoughts. And to do so is to give the character a life continually in concert, in harmony with himself, and consequently to render him continuously in keeping with likelihood, and his behaviour easily predictable, so that he resembles the people whom we

actually see alive about us. Herein Balzac excels. He sees in full detail both the *habit* and the *habitat* which derive from a man's profession, origin, education, relationships, and his fixed or predominating ideas. He knows the characteristic obsession or kink which a man acquires little by little in his workshop, his office, his study, or his shop, and which he can never get rid of. He knows the deeper furrow or—to use the word of Sainte-Beuve—the crack which the fixed and predominating idea stamps on the face, and, so to say, on the whole person of the man possessed by it. And he never loses sight of that crack, that furrow; it is ever present to his mind; he brings us back to it time and again, with a truly wonderful art in varying its expression so as not to weary us by its recurrence, and he is very ingenious in repeating what is sometimes necessary without ever saying over again what would be tiresome.

This art of recurrent gesture and of the concordance of all gestures, applies, if properly understood, much more to people of the middle and lower classes than to those of higher class and culture. People of the lower and middle classes are, in a way, nearer things, and seem

more than others to be shaped by them. The men and women of the upper classes, too, certainly bear the stamp of the world in which they move and of the series of phenomena by which they are bound, but modified by more numerous influences, yielding to more various forms of pressure, the effects of more complex causes, they elude this method somewhat, or would only be amenable to it were it more comprehensive and more supple. And it is quite certain that Balzac paints men who are neighbours of and closely allied to things wonderfully well just because he sets about painting them much in the same way and with the same insight that he bestows on the description of things. But here his instinctive method is excellent, and they are his own property, his game, his very substance, all these common middle-class people : tradesmen, lawyers, students, independent people, small owners, county law-clerks, commercial travellers, journalists, smaller artists (*Pierre Grassou* ; the bigger men not being so well seen), actors and actresses, half boors, half bourgeois, half aristocrats ; for their habitual mannerisms are almost sufficient to characterise them and to give them visible substance.

Another way of giving life to a character is to make him either attractive or the contrary. Those whom we neither like nor dislike hardly strike us as being alive ; they seem to be lifeless because we do not make them alive by our feelings towards them ; they seem to us, if alive at all, to be so merely in a very hazy kind of way because we do not live in them. So true is this that even inanimate objects become alive for us when we love them and when we hate them, and Lamartine's lines are quite right :

Inanimate objects, have you then a soul  
Which clings to ours and makes us render love ?

And yet this too would sound just as true :

Inanimate objects, have you then a soul  
Which flouts our own and makes us render hatred ?

That inexhaustible saying of Amiel, 'A landscape is a state of mind,' implies that scenery is at one time sweetness, kindness, cordiality, serenity, welcome ; at another horror, hostility, frenzy, convulsion, and despair ; and such objects, according to circumstances, we like or hate ; but we always, and because of that, think of them as living. The

whole of antique mythology is based on that, and antique mythology is eternal.

However, I will not say with greater reason, human beings are only alive for us in so far as we either love or hate them ; and as for the indifferent ones we are very uncertain as to whether they be alive or not. An excellent article by Brunetière on the ‘attractive character’ might, with but little garbling, be summed up as follows : the attractive character may be either sympathetic to us, or the contrary, provided only that he be strongly one or the other.

Well, no one better than Balzac can make a human being either minutely attractive or minutely repulsive. His usual hallucination serves here : just as he believes his characters to be alive and real, just as he speaks about them as though they were real and living persons, so he himself either loves or detests them (just as he loves Gautier and detests Sainte-Beuve), and it is therefore not difficult for him to render the one very attractive and the other very odious, and consequently to render them both alive for the reader. Therein we have a singular contradiction which genius solves quite uncon-

sciously. The man of genius lives inside his characters, otherwise he could not make them living, and moreover, so well does he materialise these different 'selves' that he detests some and loves others. He resembles Nature, which is a wolf inside a wolf, a lamb inside a lamb, a stag inside a stag; but, in addition, if we suppose Nature to hate the wolf and to feel very kindly towards the lamb, we have then the *position* of the great artist.

We always feel Balzac's hatred for journalists, fortune hunters, quacks, business sharpers, and misers which helps him to make them live intensely, for he gathers together in them, with a sort of wrath, as of electric waves, all the power of evil consistent with their characters which he can possibly imagine.

And we always feel Balzac's love for the country doctor, the village priest, the honest pious woman, the young girl in love, for artists, disinterested men of letters and idealists, great soldiers of the Empire; and all that helps him to give them the right tone, colouring, relief, and depth.

Attractive and repulsive characters are alike powerfully alive for a good many reasons, but particularly in proportion to the sympathy or

the antipathy the author bears them. I am quite sure that the *friend* of Shakespeare is Hamlet, and that his *enemy* is Iago, and that he passionately (though with different passions) searched and dived deep into both, so as to make them athrob both inwardly and outwardly with complete life.

But still the revealing word, the persistent mannerism and according behaviour, even sympathy or antipathy giving to the character something outstanding and vehement which sets him off most powerfully—all that is but the process or half-process, the apparent work of the artist which can be detected because of its appearance, and we feel that it is neither the heart of the secret nor the very gift. The gift itself of endowing with life is a faculty in the artist which remains mysterious and irreducible by any analysis.

Let us see at least these characters which he created because he was a creator, how he leads them through their lives, what kind of evolution he makes them pass through, and in what sort of progression he shows them to us.

The way of going to work here is more palpable and the artistic method more obvious. His characters are oftenest quite simple; they

have not that complexity of which we are so fond because of its likeness to life, and because we get so much pleasure from threading labyrinths, a delight which Shakespeare evidently shared, which Molière knew and even insisted on, which Tolstoi and Ibsen endeavoured, perhaps unwisely, to give their heroes. You do not often meet with a complex character in Balzac. You have him in Rastignac junior, in Rubempré, in Colonel Chabert, who is violent, tenacious, and weak, and in a few others who, as a rule, are only secondary characters. Generally speaking the complex character is unknown to Balzac ; it is foreign to his art, and even to that very art of his of which we have just been treating, and of which we shall complete the definition. And in that much Balzac is classical. The classical man loves clearness before all things, and complexity is not always very clear ; we feel it has truth in it, and still we hesitate over the degree of its truth and over the proportions in which it is true. The classic mind is always afraid that complexity may be no more than mere incoherence flaunting under another name.

And indeed it is not altogether wrong, for

if those be right who say that Nature is complex, those too are right who say that she is likewise simple, who say that a man has several passions indeed, but that one of them predominates, one which is master ending at last, and that soon enough, in overruling his whole character.

Is there such a man as the *miser*, the *prodigal*, the *libertine*, the *generous man*? ask the partisans of the complex. Are such indeed anything but pure abstractions? And must art, that follower of Nature, proceed by abstractions? ‘O!’ answer the partisans of the simple, ‘it is true that there is not perhaps one single miser who is only a miser; but, speaking generally, a miser whatever he be, is that to such a degree, that all the veins of his other passions have been sucked dry by the main duct, so that it needs but a very slight modification to introduce him to us as an out-and-out miser; it merely means the avoidance of trivial and unilluminating detail. The ruling passion is at first a large part of a man, then nearly all the man, and finishes by dominating the whole man. Thus it is right in description (e.g. La Bruyère) to depict only that one passion when making the portrait of a

man, since the whole man is referable to it ; and in narrative it is right to show that passion, first when it begins to sway, then when it becomes overbearing, and finally when it predominates the whole mind. Now, we shall find that this is just how Balzac went to work.

In that he is of the great classical school which derives from Homer, through Æschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare even, Corneille and Racine and Molière down to Balzac himself.

So much is this so that it is his turn of mind, his deliberate choice and his system. Sainte-Beuve affirms that 'Balzac did not admit that Pascal had any right to ask great men's souls the proper poise and equal exercise of opposing virtues, or of extreme and contrasting qualities of mind.' Whereupon Sainte-Beuve gets rather angry. Now is it not, in truth, Balzac who, first and last, and above all from the standpoint of literary art, is in the right ? What does Pascal say ? 'I do not look on the excess of a virtue as being of much worth unless I find at the same time the excess of its contrary, as in Epaminondas, who was both valorous and kind ; for otherwise it is an abasement rather than an uplifting. Greatness is

not shown by standing near one extreme, but rather by touching both at once and fulfilling all that lies between them. It may be that this is only a sudden movement from one extreme to the other and that greatness only exists in one place at a time, like a brand [when it is moved to and fro]. Be it so ; but that at least shows the nimbleness of the soul, if not its scope.'

Of what is Pascal thinking ? Not of what is, but rather of what ought to be. He does not (morally speaking) admire beings who are extreme and incomplete, nor does he admire—in Bossuet's phrase—‘inhuman heroes’ ; he does not admire an Ajax, an Alexander, nor perhaps a Cæsar ; he admires (morally speaking) men who have contrary and apparently irreconcilable qualities, those who cover, as it were, the whole span of human feeling, and what he needs is an Epaminondas, a Marcus Aurelius, or a Saint Louis.

Morally speaking, he is quite right ; but does he say that these great men are humanly true ? He knows perfectly well that they are extraordinary exceptions, and just for that reason he admires them so much.

So much as to *truth*.

As for what concerns art, he does not at all admire them as an artist, but as a moralist and a virtuous man. Had any one asked him whether these personages were likely to be met with, even though they were true, he would no doubt have answered 'No.' Had any one asked him whether they were artistic, he would have said 'Yes'; for everything is artistic, but they are not so according to the ordinary proceedings of art, it being an imitation of Nature, and Nature being 'weak and limited' and humanity composed of beings who fail exactly in 'spanning extremes,' and who comprise neither qualities nor their contrasting defects, 'genuine good' being no more within us than 'genuine truth,' since men 'have but truth and good in a mingled measure along with evil and falsehood.'

Hence it is not because of their being true, but, on the contrary, because of their being exceptional that Pascal admires those men who 'span the extremes'; and it is not from the standpoint of æsthetics but rather of ethics that he admires them; and the man who prides himself on his painting of humanity, must in nowise be anxious or preoccupied about Pascal's *dictum*. It does not in the least con-

cern him whether he consider it from the point of view of truth or of art. Possibly some one quoted the phrase to Balzac, and immediately he—thinking as an artist (for how should he have thought otherwise?)—mistook it for an artistic precept, and so at once replied and not without reason : ‘ It is wrong ! Men are not at all like that, and I must and will draw men as I find them. As for those who, by a fabulous freak, happen to be so [and Pascal himself admits that it is perhaps an illusion], or might be so, they would not be subject-matter for art, for they would be perfection ; they would be God Himself, and perfection cannot be drawn, and God is beyond the utmost skill of any artist, even supposing any one should attempt His likeness. Your Pascal does not know what he is talking about.’

Perhaps he would have understood nothing whatever had he been treating of art ; but he never considered it from that point of view.

We see then that Balzac, following the example of all the classics, deliberately turned a cold shoulder on complex characters. The exclusiveness, it must be admitted, implies a few shortcomings from which Balzac was hardly free, and great as was his genius, it

could do no more than succeed in veiling them. First he forbade himself, with his philosophy of the passions, the drawing of any save the generality of men. A passion, to fill a man completely, must be very great indeed. We may admit the likelihood of a man's being wholly ambitious, for ambition is a very tyrannical passion, and there are men indeed who at least seem to be, from top to toe, simply a mass of ambition. And it is very easy indeed to understand—though it be quite true that such and such a man is merely an animated craze for tulips or birds or even the collecting of buttons—that a lesser passion or hobby, however deeply you may study it, will never convey the impression of a whole man. And so Balzac is obliged to restrict himself almost always to the drawing of great *characters*, as they were called in the seventeenth century, universal types of humanity: the good liver, the ambitious man, the miser, the dupe of his own vanity, the envious man or woman. He is Molière over again, as he has a perfect right to be. General types are never worn out, for they change their aspect and even their turn of mind, if not their whole constitution, from one generation to

another. *Tartuffe* may be written over again every half-century (the best proof of it being Balzac's own repetition of *l'Avare*), on condition that the author has genius ; and Balzac in creating Grandet showed well enough that he had it.

And still we must acknowledge that we nowadays, after so many general portraits, rather like to study private character, just as after so many histories we have taken a liking for *memoirs*, the study of rather curious and unusual people, of complex temperaments, probed and analysed in their fine shades, their half-shades, even down to their apparent contradictions. Often in Balzac the absence of a *Carmen*, an *Adolphe*, or merely a *Lucienne* (*Confession of a Young Woman*) is to be felt. We often think, for instance, of those English novels in which the ridiculous characters are singularly attractive, though we know quite well why they are at once both ridiculous and attractive, why we love them and yet laugh at them, and why in quite unexpected fashion the  $\delta\alpha\kappa\rho\nu\epsilon\nu\gamma\epsilon\lambda\alpha\sigma\alpha$  fits them so perfectly. M. Albert Guinon has well said : 'They make work easy for the playwrights (and novel-writers too) who draw simple characters.

Their higher merit consists in representing in a simple manner characters who are in reality by no means so.'

What is at the bottom of the pleasure we derive from complex characters is our liking for the mysterious. There is no mystery whatever in Balzac's work. We feel rather too surely that we are going straight ahead. We feel rather too surely that, once the underlying motives of his novel are known, we could construct it ourselves. He does it so much better than we could, that is all.

But though that is a good way of explaining things (and it is merely as an explanation that I use it), let us not take undue advantage of the critical method which consists of drawing hard and fast lines, and asking of an author the kind of talent to which he cannot lay claim. Balzac only cared about simple characters and looked on complex ones as untrue. Let us limit ourselves to that statement.

And as to these simple characters, we must ask how he led them through their lives, how (if modern terminology be preferred) did he make them evolve? Always in a straight-ahead fashion, without any retrogression or roundabout turning. He looks on every one

as being continually driven by a single ruling passion which is, as it were, always at high pressure, and increases in impetus with the lapse of time. Do you remember those heroes of George Sand who become modified, their minds insensibly altering as the narrative proceeds, who on page 250 are no longer what they were on page 75, whom you always think of labelling with that tag from Plautus, *Naturam vortit Euclio*, and who, thanks to the supple talent of their author, seem nonetheless quite true to life ? Picture to your mind the exact contrary or the excessive contrary, and you have Balzac's usual way of going to work. It must have been he who gave Taine the idea of his famous axiom : ' Man is a walking theorem.' A man to Balzac stands for a passion served by intelligence and organs and thwarted by circumstances ; nothing more than that, unless it be that it increases and gathers strength as time goes on, reacting against all obstacles or hindrances, and *vires acquirit eundo*.

He set forth in a very original and explicit way the whole theory of this way of looking at things in one of Vautrin's conversations : ' Those people put on an idea and will not

leave go. [The style is Vautrin's ; he is not bound, as was Gautier, to use only coherent metaphors.] They are athirst only for one special water drawn up from a special well, and it is so often stagnant ; but, for a drink from it, they would barter away their wives and children, nay their very souls, to the devil. For some the well is gambling or the Stock Exchange, or collecting pictures or insects or music ; for others it is a woman who knows how to cook sweetmeats, and one who doesn't care a fig for them, or uses them ill. . . . Well, these funny fellows never grow weary, and would take their last blanket to the pawnshop so that she might have their last half-crown. Old Goriot is like that. . . .'

Old Goriot is like that, and so are nearly the whole of Balzac's characters. They all have a passion which is not only dominant, but *in their very constitution*. Crevel's is vanity ; Rastignac's (from a certain moment) is ambition ; Baron Hulot's is luxury ; Cousin Bette's (though with her it is rather complex, for she is capable of an old maid's love for a blond youth) is envy ; Grandet's is avarice ; Goriot's is paternal love ; Mme. Hulot's is conjugal love which will never tire, which will

kill her without ever having given way, or been driven to despair by the direst ill-treatment and ingratitude, and Mme. Hulot is to her husband what Goriot is to his daughters ; Philippe Brideau's is the instinct of an unscrupulous plunderer, the huge greed of a Verrès.<sup>1</sup>

The advantages of this way of looking on characters are obvious. The chief advantage which serves to bring out real beauties, dazzling beauties, is the fact that the character so depicted stands out in striking relief. He has no shade ; his brilliance is blinding. He remains for ever in the mind. George Sand's novels are delightful to read, but hazy in remembrance, except a few (*Mauprat, Mont-Levèche, Petite Fadette, Mare au Diable*). With Balzac it is just the other way about ; I often find Balzac hard to read, but I now actually see Goriot as though he were one of my friends, and much more clearly, for none of them has a character of such bare simplicity.

Another attraction is a certain impression of strength which we get from characters built up in this way. We instinctively love strength, and passion thus presented is, as it were, an

<sup>1</sup> The Roman proconsul against whom Cicero declaimed.—Tr.

element in Nature, a huge mass of waters or a fiery furnace which stretches out, increases, expands, overflows, rushes, burns down and devours all; unconquerable and unavoidable, with an incalculable show of magnificent energy which we regard with dread. It is a very great enjoyment, a sort of dramatic enjoyment, one of the mainsprings of drama being terror.

Stendhal was in ecstasies before a crime, and, calling *energy* the inability of a man to resist his passion, would exclaim on beholding a murderer: 'What energy! There are still men who have energy.' We are not all quite so silly as Stendhal; but still there is a shade of Stendhal in us all, and, if we neither admire nor worship *the criminal* (and herein lies the difference), and if we simply call him *the impulsive*, nevertheless when it is prolonged, tenacious, and 'of a raging steadiness,' as Saint-Simon puts it, *we admire his passion*. In what way? As a strange and startling force of nature, just as the pagans when they worshipped a wicked god with a kind of religious tremor and holy horror. And yet again why? Because we know or we feel that it is these active forces which created society, and that these passionate forces when

they are beneficent have most beautiful, most excellent, and most salutary effects, and for that reason we admire a great passion whatever it may be as a cause, when as a cause it produces bad effects instead of good ones, since it remains in any case a cause, which is to say a god.

Balzac, be it through Hulot, Grandet, or the country doctor, produces just such an impression on the mind.

Given that force, Balzac says to it: 'Go forth !' and forth it goes straight ahead, increasing its power and gathering momentum. In that again he is classical in the same way as the dramatic poets of the seventeenth century, except that he is much more so, simplifying to the extreme, for he would have admitted neither the clemency of August nor the hesitations of Nero, and would not have made a lover of Harpagon ; for he conceives all his characters in the mould of the younger Horace, of Narcissus, or Tartuffe ; whilst truth, true realism on the contrary, would consist rather in never admitting that a man should hold only a single passion incorporate in him, and goading him straight on, it being rather haphazard, and oftentimes a see-saw between opposing

passions, each one of which requires describing according to its relative worth—and that, I own, is none too easy.

Notice that his own manner is not over easy either, and that, in order to paint things thus, he must have double intensity of observation and double power of imagination. Luckily he had both to the full. If his men are not beings whom we can 'see all round,' they have at least so penetrating a light cast on them that on that side of their personality which is shown to us we see every detail with miraculous clearness. His observation is so exact and so powerful that we do not need to see the whole man in order to get a picture which seems complete, so rich is it. His imagination alike follows the straight line traced on his plan without ever swerving, though we could almost wish that it would do so; but it again is so powerful that it needs no freedom. For ever working on the same trait of character, the same passion, instinct, or craze, it will yet always find new words and new deeds which will express more and more strongly and strikingly that single bent. You enjoy it even while you regard it critically. You say: 'It is only half the book; the passion he describes is

already altogether known to me, and I am confident that this character will go unswervingly onward to the very end ; what new traits of its energy can he possibly find ?' And he always finds them, and forces you into shouts of surprise and admiration.

He is like a man who stakes all again and again, and wins every time. There is Philippe Brideau who robs his aunt and brother, who despoils his mother, stretches his inevitable hands over a legacy ever so well guarded, and then lays his claws deep on to the State treasury, rips open its hoard like a beast of prey, which seems to grow bigger, its spread of wing ever widening, its claws ever sharper and more penetrating.

There is Grandet who terrorises his servant, his wife, and his daughter, alarms and sets nearly all his small town quaking when, finding himself confronted by a passion as strong as his own, the love of his daughter for her cousin, from a tyrannical father he becomes an unnatural one, locks up and imprisons his daughter, kills his wife with grief, and sows round him, all for the sake of money, misery, sorrow and death. Gold here stands for a furious divinity which has its agent in a man

through whom it strikes all that is around him with ever-increasing, hastening, and overwhelming blows. It is Plutus clinging body and soul to his prey.

There is Goriot consumed by his love for his daughters as if by a hopeless and increasingly virulent disease, still a little in love with himself at the beginning, then forgetting himself gradually until he reaches to the self-abnegation of the fakir, depriving himself of everything for them, disgracing himself for them, envying and loving their lovers, begging, beseeching a look from them, 'some shameful little enjoyment,' or the mere favour of peeping at them; thus falling lower and lower into the uttermost social, moral, and physical misery, like a lover for his mistress, like a gambler over his cards, like an ambitious man in his old age for a seat on the parish council, like a worn-out man of letters still begging the favour of appearing in print in a sub-prefecture newspaper;—it has been very truly observed that the very best and most beautiful passions are susceptible from their excess, or rather from lack of their inhibition, of degenerating into baleful, mad, and shameful ones, for every

passion, whatever it may be, is an incipient madness.

There is Baron Hulot who, for the sake of women, ruins first his wife and then his daughter, launches into shady speculations, becomes a robber, is destitute, is called 'Jean Foutre' by his companions in arms, becomes the debtor of a courtesan, goes into hiding, goes under an *alias*, turns public scrivener, takes for mistress a little faubourg girl, or rather a young savage of fifteen ; who, when his wife comes to fetch him, asks, 'Shall I bring the girl too ?' and at last goes courting a hideous kitchenmaid, and says, 'Should my wife die, you might become a baroness,' which remark, overheard by the Baroness, ends in killing her, just as Grandet's avarice killed his wife.

The fatality of passion, as in Racine and in the Greeks—for their divine fatality is but a symbol that conceals the fatality of human crimes—the fatality of passions leading men along a sunken, narrow, straight and ever steeper way, through sorrow and shame, on to folly and death, such is the awful and sinister soul of Balzac's work.

At times he happened on something else,

and it is this that, granting that passion as a rule drives you on to madness, it may also happen to give you genius. You must, of course, have it to start with ; yes, always on condition that you have a little of it, were you inept . . . but passion transfigures ever so slight a talent into a kind of genius. The craving for gold taught Grandet his genius for business, just as the hunter's passion taught him skill in hunting. Grandet is like a general who throws a quick glance over the chessboard of business dealing, foresees everything, has the vigilance, the inspiration, the cleverness that leaves nothing to chance that might be taken from him by reckoning or foresight ; he has the loftiness of deliberation, the overwhelming rapidity of decision of a great general on the chessboard of the field of battle. Balzac, whose strong point was not modesty, used to say : ' Molière made a miser, but I have made avarice.' I would venture to say quite pleasantly in the words of Cydias : ' By your leave, it is just the other way about, and after all that is paying you no slight compliment. Molière made *avarice*. There is still in *l'Avare* much abstraction, much that is abstract. No doubt Harpagon is alive ; but

he is still and above all a collection of all the traits of classical avarice gathered together quite ingeniously into a single man, who after all has his three dimensions. *You made a miser*, that is to say a most living creature, more alive than is Molière's, fully detailed, leading a most minutely realised life, living *all the time* on every page, and one who is not, who is never, *any other miser save himself alone.*'

' And, moreover, you endowed him with the genius of his passion, the right genius befitting his passion which can be sustained by nothing save its own self. And that is a trait at once deep and admirable.'

In the same way Philippe Brideau, goaded on by his passion for plunder, finds out at Issoudun that he has some gifts as a psychologist and a diplomatist, by no means unrivalled ones, and yet quite remarkable. Even Baron Hulot invents the cleverest breaches of trust in the administration of Algeria, which might just as well have succeeded instead of failing, though it would not have altered the novel, for after lucky thefts Hulot would certainly have gone on to commit one that would have brought about his downfall, and the only

important thing here is to show passion giving genius to the impassioned man.

Now, that is true. Some one has spoken of 'inventive necessity,' and passion, being a necessity for those whom it dominates, calls forth all the inventiveness of which he is capable, and of which he would be wholly unsuspecting and unconscious were it not brought out by that passion. I think it is Descartes who said that the passions fix and make definite the ideas to which they cling, and in which they are interested, such ideas as, without their impulsion, would pass by without being in any way held or defined. The passions make an idea sink into the mind, and give it strength by bringing to bear on it the entire weight which is theirs. If genius be 'an infinite capacity for taking pains,' passion confers that just by keeping the mind for ever fixed on an idea or group of ideas which conduce to its fulfilment, and consequently it gives genius. Just as Newton discovers the law of gravity 'by continually thinking about it,' so passion makes Grandet find fortune by obliging him to keep thinking of it, and never allowing him one single moment of his days or nights to think of anything else.

That is Balzac's special discovery ; for I do not find that any of his predecessors were aware of it.

This way of conceiving and carrying out character has disadvantages which are readily foreseen and which I have in part already pointed out. Lofty or delicate-minded characters are nearly always a failure. They could, indeed, hardly be otherwise. If a man be a single passion fatally devolving like a force of Nature, he cannot help being a maniac or a kind of monster : a maniac if his passion be vulgar or trivial, such as over-eating or a craze for collecting ; a monster if his passion be mighty and enormous, such as ambition or avarice.

But what if it be a noble passion ?

It does not matter so long as it too acts like a fatal force, if nothing holds it bridled in the heart of its possessor. The man will be a virtuous maniac and nothing more ; a monster of fatherhood like Goriot. What makes a character lofty so far as art is concerned is not a beautiful passion ; it is a beautiful passion triumphing over meaner ones ; it is not the organic growth, so to speak, the mere vegetation of good instinct in the heart, it is

the triumph of that good instinct: Achilles is beautiful when he yields to Priam, only because he feels an impulse to strangle him. Now, where there is no conflict there can be no victory. But Balzac has no belief in the conflict, since he holds to the omnipresence of a single passion in a heart. That is the reason why even these virtuous men are not great souls. I have nothing to say here concerning free-will from the philosophical point of view; but were it ever laid aside as a doctrine, it would still remain indispensable to all artistic works in which humanity provides the protagonists. As soon as man becomes a thing, things are more interesting than he.

Do you want an example of how powerless Balzac is in describing a complex character, and especially in showing the conflict of passions in a man's heart? There are two dramas running parallel—and they are indeed wonderfully well ordered and linked together—in *le Père Goriot*. There is Goriot's story, and Rastignac's story of his start in life. Goriot's story is the typical tale *à la Balzac*, the painting of a fatal passion ending in madness and death. The story of Rastignac's starting out is of quite a different order: there Balzac

wanted to describe a soul still wavering between the ruling passion that is beginning to get the better of him—ambition—and the scruples of honesty due to his upbringing. ‘You have still a few swaddling clothes soiled with virtue,’ as Vautrin says to him. It is obvious that herein there is drama, curious, alluring, disquieting *drama* in real truth. Well, it is the most bloodless part of the whole book. Old Goriot, with his love of self-sacrifice and his wild fury of devoted attachment, throws everything else into the shade. Rastignac’s internal conflict, however careful Balzac may be in describing it, whatever may be the material place he gives it, is hardly noticeable at all. You might even say that I was wrong just now in calling Rastignac a complex character, for he is just like the others, has but one passion, it being in his case *to get on* by hook or by crook and *per fas aut nefas*, even when in *le Père Goriot* as Balzac depicts him he merely represents ambition in the bud, with still a few scruples due to heredity and upbringing, one who *is bored by them rather than at war with them*; and this way of looking at things is plausible enough.

There still remains the relative complexity

of young Rastignac, and the conflict, slight though it be, between his ambitious instincts and his childish virtues, which Balzac describes but weakly; having but little understanding of such things, he could not illuminate them effectively. His genius was brought to a standstill, or at least stood hesitating. He was really no more than a powerful painter of primitive forces.

Hence his superiority in the painting of middle or lower-class humanity, in his minute descriptions of commonplace things. In his most questionable works, he is saved by his fine portraiture of maniacs, as, for instance, that of the tyrannical self-supposed invalid, M. de Mortsau, in *le Lys dans la Vallée*. Hence his inferiority in the few studies of upper-class men and women which he attempted. Hence his almost complete failure in his portraits of young girls. In young girls' characters an author may put almost anything he likes; they are so very complex that hardly anything will go beyond the limits of likelihood. Undoubtedly; but what is most unlike life is to make them quite devoid of complexity. Balzac's are all simple, dull, insipid, and a little silly—Eugénie Grandet, Ursule Mirouet,

Modeste Mignon—with the bare possible exception of Rosalie de Watteville in *Albert Savarus*. When you compare them with the least country lass of George Sand's, with Fadette, Jeanne, or La Brulette, or to the young *bourgeoises* of the same author in *Mont-Revèche*, in *Mlle. Merquem*, or in *la Confession d'une jeune Fille*, you at once feel all the difference.

Balzac was an energetic and robust man ; he described well those human beings whose passions resemble spring-tides or volcanoes, and whose actions are like earthquakes. Some people are like that, and, under the apparent tranquillity imposed by social uniformity, they are much more numerous than we suppose ; but we must not forget that there are others.

## VI

## HIS TASTE

IF we go into the details of his narratives, his descriptions, his dissertations, his dialogues, in short into details of his craftsmanship, the first impression we get is one of prodigious unevenness. And that is due first of all to the fact that, in common with some other writers, he had not genius all the time; and secondly it comes of there being in him a romantic, a true realist, and a base realist, and from the fact that he would mix up his romanticism, true realism, and base realism all pell-mell—whereas Flaubert would put his realism into one book and his romanticism into the next, indiscriminately, without discretion or discernment, and without being in the least shocked or deterred by irrelevance or impropriety.

In a word, he was lacking in taste. He lacked it in a most extraordinary way, in such a way indeed as to teach it, and that wonder-

fully well, by the example of its contrary ; and in that he proved himself singularly useful.

He was a romantic of the decadence, of the declining later period. What was called romanticism, that is to say, the literature of sensibility and imagination—of imagination above all—had met the fate of all literary schools. It had become formal, a mould for unintelligent copyists, and it had a ridiculous rear-guard. Its extraordinary heroes had either become bandits or turned into burlesque and wholly incredible swashbucklers. Its weak and querulous women, its Ophelias, its Doloridas, and its Elviras, had become airy and intangible creatures, '*tenues sine corpore vitæ, volitantes cava sub imagine formæ*', its religious effusions had evaporated in a hazy mysticism, its strange adventures had degenerated into incredible tangles of fantastical events ; its elegiac poetry had degenerated into ballad songs like that of Loïsa Puget,<sup>1</sup> 'When you shall see the dead leaves fall.' All this base romanticism—for it seems difficult to give it a more definite or more honourable name—Balzac welcomed and enjoyed, he a man of genius, unless it be indeed that he

<sup>1</sup> A popular composer of ballads (1810-89).—TR.

exploited it through knowing and despising his public ; and he gave it a huge place in his work. There is something of a Eugène Sue in him, a Soulié, or a bad pupil of Ballanche,<sup>1</sup> if indeed Ballanche may be said to have had any good ones. He told lurid stories of strange convicts who underwent fantastical transformations (*Dernière Incarnation de Vautrin*), of mysterious and criminal associations (*Histoire des Treize*), novels of the police-courts (*Une ténébreuse Affaire*), in which we find observation and a certain historical sense, though they remind you, above all, of Gaboriau. He wasted half his life in doing that, and I will add once more that it would have been all one to me had it not happened, as it almost always does, that in some of his other works, and those among the most serious, the wild extravagance of the circulating library novelist breaks out all at once, both upsetting and spoiling the character of the story. We were feeling true reality, well observed and well drawn, and all at once a quick and unaccountable stroke of luck happens to some one, an unexpected change of scene or a leap into the romanesque shocks us and nullifies all our pleasure. Vulgar

<sup>1</sup> Mystic writer (1776-1847) and friend of Mme. Récamier.—TR.

and facile imagination—the student's or the grisette's imagination—has carried the day.

Such is the sudden transition of M. de Mort-sauf (*le Lys dans la Vallée*) from penury to great wealth ; such is Philippe Brideau's rapid and inexplicable metamorphosis from a swindling old soldier, under police supervision, into an officer general, high dignitary, duke and peer of France, or next door to it. Are we reading a novel or the *Grande Duchesse de Gerolstein* ? <sup>1</sup>

The *Illusions perdues* is a good realistic novel in which there is much talent. But look closely into the life that Rubempré leads when afloat in journalism. Look at the account of one of his days, either of pleasure or of toil. I defy you to find in it—the greatest power of work being supposed and sleep quite left out of account—less than forty or forty-five hours. Pantagruel's day's work with Ponocratès seems mere idleness compared to it. Remember likewise the no less gigantic wonders as regards work and economy in *Albert Savarus* and *la Peau de Chagrin*. We are in the midst of phantasmagoria. It spoils and weakens what is beside it, makes you distrustful, and takes

<sup>1</sup> The opera-bouffe of Offenbach.—TR.

away, so to speak, from the authority of his observation as a painter of manners.

Nothing could be queerer, as a conception, as an imagination utterly freed from reality, than *Petits Bourgeois* and *Dernière Incarnation de Vautrin*; but in *Illusions perdues*, that is itself so sensible a novel, that false cardinal who meets on a road a young man he has never seen before, and who kisses him after ten minutes' talk, and that Rubempré who allows the former to do so without the least marvelling, are at least very unusual people. In a story full of characters ever so real, a single false and conventional being is enough to set us all at sixes and sevens. In *la Cousine Bette* we come across that little Atala of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, a tiny girl who is physically depraved and yet perfectly innocent, since she is quite ignorant of everything, not only of the difference between good and evil, but of the civil institutions as well—marriage, town hall, church, the difference between a legal wife and one who is not so; and it seems that she has never seen a wedding pass along her suburban streets. Call it lack of conscience if you will; but, as for ignorance of social conditions and acts in a little Parisian

girl—why, it is simply fantastic. It is a young savage, and not a suburban girl that you are introduced to. And this is the more so as she is far from being stupid ; she is clever and sharp, and seems to have read the newspapers, for she has quite caught the style of them : ‘ Father wanted it . . . but *mother did not approve*’—‘ I can’t say why, but *I was the cause of continual bickering between my parents*.’ Such are the irreconcilable elements which proclaim the glaring improbability. Such an Atala does not exist.

*Femme de trente Ans* was, in its first drafting, a plain tale, precise and interesting in its truth, and Sainte-Beuve was quite right in advising us to read it in its first shape. When Balzac had embellished it, this is what he turned it into : When twenty-five, Mme. d’Aiglemont, who had married a booby of whom she had once been fond, but of whom she had grown weary, took a lover and was soon the involuntary cause of his death. When thirty she took another. Her daughter Hélène, who is the child of her husband, cannot stand her little brother, who is the first lover’s son, and his mother’s favourite. During a walk in the suburbs she pushes him over a

steep embankment into the Bièvre, and he is drowned. She grows up. She is now eighteen. One evening, fairly late, there is a double knock at the door of M. and Mme. d'Aiglemont's mansion. It is a man who has just committed murder, and who is pursued by mounted gendarmes. Without vouchsafing to tell them his name or anything else, he demands their hospitality for two hours, and M. d'Aiglemont grants it him, and, while he goes out to talk to the gendarmes, who in turn have been knocking at the door, Hélène goes up to the bedroom in which her father has hidden the strange visitor, contemplates him, exchanges a few words, and comes down again. She is soon followed by the murderer, who breaks in upon the family circle. 'A murderer here !' cries M. d'Aiglemont. Then comes the thunderbolt. As for Hélène, that word seemed to decide her life for her, and her face betrayed not the least sign of astonishment. It was as though she had been expecting this man. Her so vast thoughts had not been without their meaning. The punishment which God had prepared for her sins was revealed. Deeming herself as much a criminal as he, the girl looked on him with an untroubled eye ; she was his

mate, his sister. For her, God's will was manifest in this strange event. A few years later and reason would have righted her remorse; but at that moment it maddened her. The stranger remained motionless and cold. A disdainful smile hovered over his face and his thick red lips. 'Murder an old man!' said M. d'Aiglemont to the stranger, '... have you never had any family then?... Away with you....' The murderer withdraws; but Hélène goes after him, and declares that she will follow him wherever he goes. She will not go back on that resolution. 'But his hands are stained with blood,' says her father. 'I will wipe it off,' replies his daughter. 'But how do you know that he wants you?' 'I believe in him,' says Hélène. 'But you can't realise all the sufferings that you will have to go through.' 'I think of his.' Finally she sets out with the murderer, who is quite willing to take her. 'Madam,' says M. d'Aiglemont to his wife, 'I think I must be dreaming; this adventure conceals some mystery; you must know something about it.'

The murderer turns pirate; M. d'Aiglemont meets him during a voyage, the pirate capturing the vessel on which he is a passenger, and

slaughtering its crew. He was just on the point of throwing M. d'Aiglemont himself into the water when their eyes met; 'the father and the son-in-law recognised each other in a flash.' Thereupon the son-in-law is merciful and throws his father-in-law into his daughter's arms: 'Hélène!'—'My father!' . . . 'And are you happy?'—'I am the happiest of women.'—'And your conscience?'—'*He* is my conscience.' The generous pirate gives M. d'Aiglemont a huge bundle of bank-notes and puts him ashore on the French coast. M. d'Aiglemont dies shortly afterwards.

Some years later Mme. d'Aiglemont, at a small village hostelry in the Pyrenees where she has come to drink the waters, meets a young woman who is dying. It is Hélène, who dies, repentant, in her mother's arms.

The latter had a younger daughter, Moïna, left. She married, and had a lover who was the son of the very man last favoured by her mother. Mme. d'Aiglemont lectures her about it. 'Well, mother, I did not suppose you would be jealous of any one but the father.' 'My child,' answered Mme. d'Aiglemont, in an altered voice, 'you have just been more pitiless towards your mother than was ever the man

whom she offended, more pitiless than God Himself perchance will be.' And she dies the same day.

That is what Balzac looked upon, and quite seriously perhaps, as a novel of manners.

All the same his mysticism, so perfectly unlike his nature, smacks of the romantic. There is something about it that is tender, strained, and deliberately sought for. Not only are *Louis Lambert* and *Séraphita* (in spite of its rather beautiful lyrical ending) tedious and badly linked day-dreams, but they do not even ring true. They seem to be, like George Sand's *les Sept Cordes de la Lyre*, the effect of a kind of desperate resolve to produce something in keeping with the prevailing taste. 'They make monsters, let us make monsters too,' said George Sand. 'They also make clouds,' Balzac seems to say, 'let us therefore be as cloudy as any of them.'

It was his ambition to rewrite Sainte-Beuve's *Volupté*, which he considered false, to write the novel of chaste love, of pure virtue, and exalted delicacy; and he carried out his intention in *le Lys dans la Vallée*. That book, very much admired when it was first brought out, is perhaps, except for a few details, the

very worst novel that I know of. Because Mme. de Mortsauf keeps her chastity and makes speeches of such abysmal pedantry as far outdo *la Nouvelle Héloïse*, about virtue, abnegation, renunciation, and self-sacrifice, Balzac thinks he has described the honest woman. It is true that this honest woman spends all her evenings in a park explaining virtue to a young man whom she loves. It seems even that she would lose nothing on the score of honesty by talking less about it. All the more so an account of her style, which is thus : 'Did not my confession show you the three children for whose sake I must not transgress, on whom I must weep my healing dew, and let my soul irradiate them without pollution of its slightest particle ? Do not embitter a mother's milk ! ' The young man is just as upright, and has the same simple way of expressing himself. It is he who relates a pathetic scene in which he played a very beautiful part : 'Madame is right, I said, beginning to speak in a tremulous voice which vibrated in those two hearts into which I threw my hopes lost for ever, and which I calmed by the expression of the loftiest of all grief, the dull cry of which quenched that dispute, just as everything is hushed when

the lion roars. Yea, the supremest boon which reason can confer on us is to ascribe our virtues to the beings whose happiness is our work, and to whom we give happiness not by calculating, nor by duty, but by an inexhaustible and voluntary affection.' Balzac evidently took pains. The thing was to set really elect souls thinking and speaking. He understood well enough that high moral distinction consists in expressing the thoughts of Joseph Prudhomme in the style of M. d'Arlincourt.

Then there was in Balzac a mock romantic, a popular romantic, a trashy romantic, who plays havoc with the realistic writer ; there was the true realistic writer whom we have already closely examined and admired ; and then, at the other end of the scale, there was a rather low realistic writer, a little unkindly, who gives us a foretaste of what was for some time called ' Naturalism.'

This low realism consists in seeking truth and reality among the lowest and most repugnant parts of real life, as though they were the whole of it. Antiquity with its Apuleius and Petronius knew of it, the sixteenth century with its Béroald de Verville and the eighteenth century with its Restif also knew of it. Realism,

true realism, slips easily into this degeneracy of itself. It is necessary to understand, also, that if realism be a solid basis of art, nothing is nevertheless more difficult than to be truly realistic without overstepping the mark. Realistic art consists in seeing things and men exactly and dispassionately, and in describing them in the same way. It should therefore have, for method—not to throw at random all reality into its work of art, for that is materially impossible, and if realism meant no more than that, the art of realism would consist of walking up and down the street—but rather to choose *without passion*, with no other taste but for the truth, the most significant among the thousand details of reality, and to arrange them in order, so as to give us the very impress of reality itself, only even more vividly.

It seems easy enough though it is most difficult, all question of genius being put aside. The fact is that when an artist writes he does so as every one does everything, impelled thereto by some sort of passion. There is always, in spite of himself, some ulterior motive, some secret hankering to prove, convince, touch, convert, or win over the reader; to pour into his work something of his own thoughts, hopes,

regrets, or desires. Here, on the other hand, there must be nothing of all that; realistic art must be as impersonal as is possible. It must reveal nothing of the author's own feelings. And why not?

Because we are concerned merely with the description of reality, and as soon as I catch sight of the author's own feelings, or even of his leanings, I at once suspect him of having arranged his reality and given it a twist to suit his own predilections. From that moment the illusion of reality is no more. It has failed. We are dealing with quite another art which, I am fully aware, may be quite admirable; but it is no longer realism.

If this be true, it will be readily seen how very intricate things become. It is very difficult for a writer to write without being moved thereto by his feelings, and as soon as his feelings stir him in writing he ceases to be a realist. For exactly as something ceases to be realism, so it becomes not merely something different, but its very contrary.

And this degeneration of realism into things which are the very negation of it happens constantly in the history of the art. Racine is a realist with a passion for truth, as well as for a

certain conventional nobleness which rarely makes you lose sight of reality ; La Bruyère is a wonderfully exact realist, but with a certain misanthropical bitterness ; the English realists of the nineteenth century, with a penetrating insight and an incomparable sense of reality, take good care to move the reader over human misery, and have effusions of sensibility, as in Dickens, or have a bent for moralising and a certain preachiness, as in George Eliot—and these things are most acceptable and often touching in themselves, but they already lead us a little astray from that art which claims to be no more than ‘ the sworn testimony of a witness on oath.’<sup>1</sup>

It even comes about, according to the special feeling which happens to prompt the author, that realism leads to the most divergent ways in describing the same people. Flaubert and Tolstoi have both a real passion for middle-class men of less than average intellect. Only Flaubert describes them—and that wonderfully well—with truly savage irony, banter, and sarcasm, nudging us every moment most ungraciously, as who should say, ‘ Are they

<sup>1</sup> George Eliot’s own expression in *Adam Bede*. Compare *le Roman Naturaliste* of Brunetière.

ludicrous enough ? ' while Tolstoi describes, with wonderful fidelity, but with a kind of veneration and tenderness, seeming as though at every line he actually exclaimed, ' What real grandeur ! ' And I do not know which of the two is the less pleasing.

In France it is, as a rule, to the side of sarcasm—oftenest implicit—that our realistic writers tend. Scarron, Furetière (the author of *Caquets de l'Accouchée*), La Bruyère hardly described true, common, middle-class life save to mock at it. Realism, in the classical period, is generally considered only fit subject-matter for comic work.

Balzac's originality is just in his understanding that it might be supremely tragical. Only if it is on this side that he scored, it is also the side on which he overreached himself. That is where his passion leads him, that is where he becomes systematic, and that is where he goes astray from true realism. Realism becomes with him a form of pessimism. He was undeniably fond of looking at the ugly side of things and of men. He would storm in private conversation against 'the hypocrisy of the beautiful.' He loved to push to extremes, beyond the limits of truth, at least beyond

the limits of ordinary and average truth (and ordinary and average truth is the proper quarry for true realism)—the horror of his situations, the villainy, the treachery, and the meanness of men ; in short, he opened up the way for that ‘brutal literature’ which Weiss so happily named. He loved subjects that were more than a little shameful, sinister, or shocking, as may be seen in *Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes*, *la Fille aux Yeux d'or*, and *Une Passion dans le Désert*. He loved what was violent and brutal.

It is neither brutality nor violence that I pretend to root out of art’s domain ; it is brutality and violence when they are manifestly false, and by false I mean most exceptional, outside average truth, and when they ruin the impression of reality which the work made at its outset. That Rubempré should be reduced to spending a night by the corpse of his mistress, that he should be forced to rhyme drinking songs and obscenity to pay for its burial—that I find tragic, and I am moved, for it may very well be true. But that Vautrin, hidden at the Vauquer boarding-house, with all the appearance of an honest and jovial *bourgeois*, should suddenly launch out into a dissertation

(wonderful indeed in itself) on Paris considered as a cut-throat, seems to me no more than a useless and cynical outburst; it is not Vautrin who speaks—he is far too clever for that—it is Balzac himself who here obtrudes with his own pessimistic profession of faith. In making Mme. Marneffe in her death-bed repentance say in ignoble language such as was never hers in life—‘I must make up God,’ I see only too well that Balzac falsifies the character, stretches it to the very limit and beyond, outrages truth so as to glut his whim for shocking the honest reader by an exhibition of coarseness.

I formerly exaggerated the extent of brutal literature in Balzac’s work. All things considered, it is not very considerable, and if the thing be to *assess* it, which seems a little pedantic, though it be no more than critical honesty, the extent in Balzac’s work of shoddy romanticism is much more important than that of low realism. Still, that too is sufficiently important, and if in regard to it Balzac hardly went the length of his contemptible successors, who have ended in rehabilitating him, he still went much farther than his predecessors of the nineteenth century, if he may be said to have

had any. And if the inheritors of that part of his legacy cause him to appear innocent when compared with them, it is still true that they put the responsibility on their forerunner, since they march under his flag, as indeed they have considerable reason for doing. A whole literature grew up out of Balzac's cesspools. A good many writers saw or wished to see nothing but that in him and imitated nothing else. He is responsible for all the easy-going and damnable audacity of all those novel-writers who pretended to believe that realism lies in the study of sinister or shameful abnormality; who, under the cloak of reality, only made a show of loathsome horror, and who, I very much regret to say, ended by turning the word 'realism' into a current synonym for 'infamous writings.'

Ready-made romanticism, coarse realism are the two things which spoil Balzac's work, the former very much and the latter a little. What spoils nearly the whole of it is the vulgarity that was inherent in the man's nature and crept into nearly everything he did. Sainte-Beuve, in a short admonishment addressed to Taine but intended especially for Balzac (and we know how fond he was of these

underhand and indirect ways), pointed out very neatly this almost inherent vulgarity: 'In speaking of *la Princesse de Clèves*, you cite one of Balzac's novels *le Lys dans la Vallée*, and you own that people find it "coarse and medical" when compared with the other. Let me tell you that you suppose rather too easily that those quite modern novels, those parts of the dialogue quoted by you, are accepted or have been accepted when they were first brought out as types of present-day delicacy. For my part I confess I lived in my youth only with people who were shocked by them, though indeed they did justice to their authors in other parts of their talent. I can assure you that those passages that seem to you coarse only when compared with *la Princesse de Clèves* seemed in my time and to most readers quite coarse in themselves. Our scales, even in that nineteenth century so different from the others, were less clumsy than you suppose. It is true that fair criticism, sincere and veracious, was, as it perhaps still is, only made in talking; people write only to praise. That would merely prove that you must discount much that is written, and that when it is said and repeated that literature is the expression

of society, it is advisable to accept the dictum only with considerable caution and reserve' (1864).

Yes, it is perfectly true that Balzac's work is marred by much trivial coarseness which can never be looked on as anything else, whatever be the age. He is vulgar, for instance, whenever he tries to be witty, for he had no real wit whatever. He is wonderful in the conversation which he puts into the mouths of 'the wittiest men in Paris.' They are stupid ; his Parisian humorists carry on like merry-making wagoners ; his dukes indulge in puns, in *à peu près*, and in *queues de mots*. He himself, when witty on his own account, talks as follows : 'Instead of those heaps of stuffed game fated never to be cooked, instead of those fantastic fishes that justify the sally of the mountebank, "I saw a beautiful carp, I hope to buy it in a week," instead of those *first-fruits* (which ought rather to be called *last-fruits*) deceitfully displayed in shop-windows for the delight of corporals and their sweethearts, honest Flicoteaux set out salad-bowls adorned with many mends in which heaps of stewed prunes cheered the eyes of the guests, sure that the word *dessert*, so wasted on most bills, was

not a mere title-deed. . . . The food is but little varied. Potatoes last eternally here; were there not a single potato left in Ireland, nor anywhere else, you would still find some at Flicoteaux's. They have appeared there for the last thirty years under that fair colour of which Titian was so fond, sprinkled over with chopped pot herbs, and enjoying a privilege much envied by the ladies—that of looking in 1814 just as they will appear in 1840. . . . The female of the ox predominates, and her son abounds under a variety of most ingenious aspects. An old slander, once again repeated at the time of Lucien's coming, consisted in attributing the appearance of beef-steak to some mortality among horses. . . . The guests there have a gravity which hardly ever thaws, perhaps owing to the catholicity of the wine which forbids all expansion. . . . ' And so on.

What may seem astonishing at first, though it ought not to surprise us when we remember that the 'thing seen' is always a thing seen through a temperament—he saw something of the world, and so true is it that mere observation is not enough and that our own feelings, at least in part, are compromised in the impression which things make on us, that his high life

reminds you of a door-keeper's lodge in the poorer districts. A lady questioning a viscount says, ' Do you really mean it, my pet ? ' A duchess exclaims '*Hein ?*' And Eugène understood that *hein* which need not perhaps astonish us when we remember his extraordinary behaviour, for two hours on end, at Mme. Restaud's. A viscountess says to a baron at their second meeting, ' You are a darling man,' and Eugène (for once again it is he) says to himself, ' She is charming ! ' He is really an astonishing fellow is Eugène.

It all becomes very amusing, without Balzac in the least meaning it, by reason of its absurdity. You might take it to be a parody. These are great ladies, and there is even a young girl : ' Hortense's first word [she is the young girl] on addressing her aunt had been, " How 's your lover ? . . . I should like to meet him." " So as to see what sort of a looking man it is that can love an old nanny-goat ? " " He must be a monstrous old clerk with a billy-goat's beard," said Hortense. " I have borne him in my heart these four years. . . ." " You don't know what it is to love." " We all know that business the minute we are born. . . ." ' And so on.

A baroness is obliged to seek an interview with an actress, and Balzac warns us that she finds her calm and sedate, noble, simple, and with a bearing that pays homage to the virtuous wife. Whereupon the actress summons her domestic, and has with him, the baroness making a third party, a back-parlour conversation : ‘ Madam’s embroiderer is married.’ ‘ An irregular union ? ’ asked Josepha. And then to the baroness herself : ‘ We ’ll soon find your husband for you, and, if he is down in the mud, well, he can wash himself again. For well-brought-up people it is only a question of clothes. . . . Damme ! The poor man ’s fond of women. Well, look here, if you ’d only got a little of our spice about you you ’d never have let him go running loose ; for you would have been what we know how to be—all women for one man. The government ought really to start a training-school for honest women. But governments are so strait-laced ! People *we* lead lead them. As for me, I pity the people. . . . ’ That is Balzac’s notion of fine breeding.

He can say of Hulot, the prey of Mme. Marnette : ‘ He had not yet known the charms of virtue that withstands, and Valérie made him taste them, as the song goes, all along the river.

“Don’t begin by dishonouring the woman whom you pretend to love,” Valérie would say, “otherwise I shall not believe you, and I like to believe you,” she added with an ogling glance, like Saint Theresa squinting at the sky.’

In the admirable *Ménage de Garçon*, one-third of the whole book is devoted to relating the silly tricks of the *Chevaliers de la Désœuvrance* without their being in the least degree useful to the development of the story, nor even connected with the novel in any way whatever, so convinced was the author that these smart tricks were interesting in themselves.

Here again is the Marchioness d’Espiré, who says to Rubempré, on seeing him, I believe, for the first time, ‘. . . You treat these ideas as visionary or merely trifling ; but we have seen a little of life and we know how much stability there is in the title of count for an elegant and handsome young man.’ And Lucien has not a word nor a gesture to offer by way of protest ; he finds it quite natural that a marchioness should say that to him point-blank. Balzac too. ‘Lucien thought it was a prodigy like the one whom he met at his first *soirée* at the Dramatic Panorama.’ And

Balzac himself shows no sensible difference between the *soirée* at the Dramatic Panorama and that spent at Mme. de Montcornet's.

In *la Femme abandonnée* Balzac meant to paint a woman of the highest rank in the stern and sad dignity of her abandonment, her solitude, and her despair. This is how she receives a young gentleman whom she has never seen, and who has forced his way into her house by means of a trick, though a harmless one: 'At the corner of the mantelpiece he saw a young woman sitting in a modern easy-chair, the low seat of which allowed her to tilt her head at various angles, all of them full of grace and elegance; to bow, to bend, to hold it up languidly as if it were a heavy burden; then to cross her feet[?], to show or to hide them under the long folds of a black dress. The viscountess was about to lay down on a small round table the book she had been reading; when, having at the same time turned her head towards M. de Nueil, the book being badly put [this book that turns its head towards M. de Nueil is very curious], she stumbled into the gap which was between the table and the easy-chair. Without seeming in the least upset by the incident, she rose and

returned the young man's bow, but in a scarcely perceptible way, hardly rising from the seat in which her body remained sunken. She bent forward, quickly poked the fire, and then, stooping down, picked up her glove, which she negligently put on her left hand, looking about for the other with a glance which she promptly repressed; for with her right hand, so white, ringless, delicate, with tapering fingers, the pink nails forming perfect ovals, she indicated a chair *as though bidding Gaston to sit down*. When her unknown guest was seated, she turned her head towards him with an interrogatory and coquettish movement, the fineness of which cannot be described; it was compact of those benevolent intentions, those gestures at once gracious and defined, which early upbringing and constant familiarity with tasteful things can alone bestow. These manifold movements succeeded one another *rapidly in one moment*, in perfect suavity devoid of all haste, and charmed Gaston by that mingling of carefulness and easy frankness which a beautiful woman adds to the aristocratic bearing of high rank.'

All of which means no more than that Gaston has been taken in by the pretty looks and

gestures and the affected behaviour of a provincial actress playing *le Caprice*.

A few moments later, Mme. de Beauséant having shown him the door (and with very good reason), Gaston, after having gone as far as the vestibule, comes back quietly and says to her: ““Jacques lighted the way for me.”” And his smile, imbued with a half melancholy grace, robbed the phrase of all that was jocular, and the tone in which he uttered it was enough to move the soul. Mme. de Beauséant was disarmed.’

Well, she was very easily overcome then.

““Madam,”” cried Gaston softly, “you know my fault, but you are ignorant of my crimes; if you only knew what happiness I . . .” “Ah! beware,” she said, lifting up one of her fingers with a mysterious air *to the level of her nose which she skimmed*, while with the other hand she made a gesture as though to reach for the bell-pull. . . .”

A little farther on: ‘. . . The viscountess raised her beautiful eyes to the cornice, to which she no doubt confided everything that a stranger may not hear. A cornice is quite the gentlest, the most submissive, and the kindest confidante a woman can find on occa-

sions when she dare not look at her interlocutor. The boudoir cornice is an institution. Is it not a confessional without the priest ? At this moment Mme. de Beauséant was full of eloquence and beauty. . . .

Balzac's ineffable ineptitude in describing society women has been denied. Brunetière, in his otherwise admirable book entitled *Honoré de Balzac*, wrote as follows, very evidently aiming a shaft at myself : 'I do not agree with the statement [that he is coarse and vulgar] in describing upper-class people, great lords and ladies. Sainte-Beuve, who lived at the same time and moved in the same circles, vouches for their truth to life : "Who," says he, "better than Balzac has more delightfully painted the veterans and the beauties of the Empire ? *Who especially more delightfully touched in the duchesses and the viscountesses of the latter restoration ?*" I prefer the testimony of Sainte-Beuve, who knew in their decline some of those "viscountesses" and "duchesses," such as Mme. de Beauséant or Mme. de Langeais, to the opinion of some honest university people<sup>1</sup> who do not recognise in those ladies their ideal as regards elegance, distinction, and

<sup>1</sup> M. Faguet being professor at the Sorbonne.—TR.

aristocracy. . . . ' Sainte-Beuve is surely a very *bourgeois* surety, and I would point out that the duchesses and viscountesses at the end of the Restoration were known neither to Sainte-Beuve nor to Balzac, the former only having begun to frequent aristocratic drawing-rooms in 1840, and Balzac, in spite of his very short *liaison* with Mme. de Castries, having become a regular attendant only a few months before that date. Nay, Sainte-Beuve himself has told us that the Faubourg Saint-Germain *was absolutely closed to men of letters before 1830*, and since it had to spend a few years getting used to their admittance, we must conclude that Sainte-Beuve's testimony is not valid as regards the great ladies of the Restoration, even at the end of it.

And I would point out above all that Sainte-Beuve being himself rather 'vulgar' where women were concerned, to say the least of it, his is hardly the testimony that should be sought on such a point; and he may very well have seen the Faubourg Saint-Germain under Louis Philippe exactly as Balzac did, without that proving that either of them saw it as it really was.

But I admit that it makes us a little uneasy

as to what this noble neighbourhood was like toward 1840, that Balzac should have seen it as he has painted, and that Sainte-Beuve should deem him to have seen them rightly and to have 'touched them in delightfully.' And yet, from the little I saw of that world, I have still a doubt, in judging from their grandchildren, of the rightness of the vision of those two observers of their grandmothers. No, I do not think that the dukes and duchesses of Balzac's time were, as regards speech and gesture, quite such unusual persons as we have seen him setting before us.

## VII

## HIS STYLE

EVERYBODY agrees that Balzac wrote badly. There is no need to rectify opinion on that point. He wrote badly.

But it sometimes happens, indeed often enough, that this passes unnoticed, and that in three cases.

First of all in his portraits. Not only did Balzac make portraits, above all physical portraits, wonderfully well, with a sure selection of significant traits ; but when he made them, his style itself, his skill, and his language too, could hardly be bettered. I would refer to the portraits quoted in the middle of this book. The reader will no doubt consider that even there the sentence concerning M. Poiret's overcoat—‘ . . . the faded lappets of his overcoat floating loose and ill concealing almost empty breeches and blue-hosed spindle-shanks that shook like a drunkard's, and showing his dingy white waistcoat and his coarse crumpled

muslin shirt-frill that matched but ill with the black tie round his scraggy turkey neck'—is a dreadfully tangled sentence which has this sole excuse—against which, however, much may be urged—that it gives an idea of the good man's careless get-up, and you will no doubt find it to be so; but read once again all the other portraits quoted, and you will see that the sharpness of the style corresponds exactly to the clearness of the author's vision. Balzac's portraits are as a rule very well written, and they are those moreover of a master-hand.

He also writes very well when he neither thinks of it nor takes any pains to do so. It sometimes happens that Balzac, spurred on no doubt by his interest in his subject, goes straight ahead without troubling his head about the *Académie Française*, and merely thinking of the facts he is relating. In that case he has neither qualities nor defects. He makes himself understood, he is readable, that is all. He does not think of writing well, nor do we dream of asking him to do so. Nobody ever thinks of giving careful examination to a collection of *faits divers*. He ought always to have written like that. There is an example of this neutral style in which, while being all

that I have said, he still allows himself a little furtive elegance : ‘ Exchanging a few words with his cousin on the brink of the well, remaining seated on the bench in the little garden until sundown, busy telling each other their soaring dreams or musing amidst the calm that reigned between the rampart and the house, just as one might under the vaulted roofing of a church, Charles realised all the holiness of love ; for his great lady, his beloved *Annette*, had taught him nothing but stormy unrest. He was not getting rid of his coquettish, vain, and blazing Parisian passion, and giving place to pure and true love. He loved this house of which the customs no longer seemed to him quite so ridiculous. He came down early in order to steal a few minutes’ talk with *Eugénie*, before old *Grandet* came to dole out the provisions, and when the old man’s footsteps echoed on the stairs, he would sneak off into the garden. The slight guiltiness of that early meeting, kept secret even from *Eugénie*’s mother, and of which *Nanon* pretended to be unaware, gave to the most innocent love in the world the attraction of a forbidden pleasure. And then, breakfast being over, and old *Grandet* gone to make the round of his estate and farm-

land, Charles remained between the mother and daughter, experiencing unknown delights in lending his hands for unwinding the skein, in watching them at work, in listening to their babble. The simplicity of that clostral life, revealing to him the beauty of those souls to whom the outside world was unknown, touched him deeply. . . .

Here is another example, this time a landscape ; and landscapes are very rare in Balzac. You see plainly that, along with Stendhal, what he kept a look-out for on his journeys was houses and men. But in 1831, the date when he wrote the first part of *la Femme de trente Ans*, writers had 'to sketch in landscapes,' under pain of passing for nothing as men of letters. Balzac sketches in the following one, simple, sober enough, and most accurate (for it was the description of places he had seen a hundred times), and which he makes the reader see quite plainly, written in quite a praiseworthy style : 'From Vouvray to Tours the amazing sinuosities of this jagged slope are inhabited by a population of vine-growers. In many places there are three ledges of houses one above the other, hewn out of the rock, and linked together by dangerous steps cut in the

stone itself ; on the level with a roof a young girl with a red skirt runs out to her garden. The smoke of a chimney ascends between the shoots and leafage of the vine. Farmers are busy ploughing perpendicular fields. An old woman, quietly seated on a fragment of fallen boulder, turns her spinning-wheel under the almond-blossom and watches the travellers below her with amusement at their fright. She worries no more about the fissures in the ground than about the impending downfall of an old wall the layers of which are now hardly held together by the tortuous roots of ivy that spreads like a live carpet over the disjointed stones of the ancient rampart. The cooper's hammer makes the vaults of the lofty caves resound. The ground is tilled and teeming everywhere, even where Nature has refused soil for human industry. The threefold picture of this scene of which we have hardly indicated the aspect brought to the soul one of those sights that remain for ever engraved on the memory ; and when a poet had enjoyed it, his dream came back again and again to rear anew its romantic effects in his mind. At the moment when the carriage reached the bridge over the Cisse, several white sails surged up

between the islets of the Loire, and gave an added harmony to that harmonious scene. The redolence of the willow-trees that lined the stream added its penetrating scent to those of the humid breeze ; the birds warbled in amorous concert, the monotonous song of the goat-herd joined in with its wild melancholy, whilst the shouts of the bargemen told of distant traffic astir. Soft mists capriciously hovering over the scattered trees in that vast landscape gave it a final grace. It was Touraine in all its glory, springtide in all its splendour. That part of France, the only one which foreign armies were not to disturb, was at that moment the only one to be quiet, and it seemed as though it defied invasion.'

And last of all, he happens to set a caretaker or a tinker talking. Then he is wonderful. I am not now joking. He is wonderful as regards faithfulness, accuracy, and truth. You may think M. Pons' caretaker's chatter too long ; but you must own that it is reality itself. It is not a parody, it is not an equivalent ; it is simple truth ; it is just a vulgar Paris woman whom you hear.

These are the three cases in which by happy accident Balzac happens to write well. Every-

where else his style is painful. I suppose I have said quite enough of the way in which he makes his upper-class people talk. I only refer to it to point out that if they seem to us so false, it is at least the author's fault quite as much as the reader's. Having the same feelings, but expressing them in language proper to their condition, they would seem to be men of fashion hardly worthy of their status, but still men of fashion. Yet it must be remembered that men of this class are so readily and surely recognised by their way of talking, that a fault of style implies a flaw in the manners as a whole.

When he speaks on his own account, in his narratives, reflections, dissertations, analyses, even very often in his descriptions, it is difficult to say how bad he is. He talks like a mischievous wag bent on aping the romantic. He can write: 'A thing worthy of notice is the power of infusion which the feelings possess. . . .' He will indulge in the vulgar and affected metaphors of provincial wits: 'The next morning the post poured into two hearts the poison of two anonymous letters.' — 'The benefactress dipped the bread of the exile into the absinthe of reproach.' 'If the season during which a woman struggles

against love's onset offered to Rastignac the spoil of its first-fruits, they became to him as costly as they were green, acrid, and delicious of savour.'

His metaphors are bewildering: 'Such is Algeria as regards victualling. A hash flavoured with the ink-bottle of all rising administrations.'

He makes most enigmatic distinctions between the meanings of words: 'Julie listened to her aunt with as much astonishment as stupefaction. . . .' You wonder why he seems to consider astonishment and stupefaction as different feelings; it is because he fancies *stupefaction* means *dread*: ' . . . surprised at hearing words the wisdom of which was rather foreboded than understood by her, and *startled* on hearing once more uttered by a relative the sentence already passed on Victor by her father.'

The very meaning of words often escapes him and makes him utter unheard-of things. Why is the love of a woman of thirty more flattering to a young man than that of a young girl? Because 'whereas one may be led on by curiosity or by seductions other than those of real love, the other obeys a *conscientious*

feeling.' He meant to say *conscious* ; and the thing he says instead is the most comical in the world.

In the same way Baron Hulot, who belongs to the class that knows how to speak correctly, says to a young artist, 'Come along, sir, life may turn out well for you. You will soon discover that no one can stay long in Paris *with impunity* if he has talent.' He meant to say *unrewarded*, and says just the opposite.

' After having *espoused* for a time a life similar to that of a squirrel spinning round in its cage, he felt *the lack of opposition[?]* in a life where everything was fore-ordained. . . .'

' You must have climbed up all the chimeras with their double white wings who offer their feminine backs to glowing imaginations in order to understand the torture which preyed on Gaston de Nueil.'

' The humanity of a courtesan in love begets such magnificence as might put even the angels to shame.'

' The public admires the witty work of this handful of men and sees no harm in it ; it does not realise that the sharp blade of cutting words athirst for vengeance dabbles in self-

love skilfully probed, and bleeding from a thousand thrusts.'

' Providence has also doubtlessly strongly protected the families of employees and the lower classes for whom these hindrances are at least doubled by the environment in which they accomplish their evolution.'

' To win the favours of Mme. Marneffe was for him not merely the *eagerness of his chimera*, but also a matter of money.'

The very parts which we must admit are best written in his work abound in those faults which are characteristic of all decline: profusion, superabundance, tinsel, varnish, false similes and metaphors, things claiming to be things seen which have no precision.

' . . . At the bottom of the wide-necked china vase fancy to yourself a wide margin composed wholly of those white tufts peculiar to the sedum of the Touraine vines: vague images of desired forms, surging up like those of an obedient slave. From this ledge come forth spirals of the bindweed with its white bells, sprays of the pink rest-harrow mixed with fronds of fern, a few oak twigs with magnificently tinted and glossy leaves, all of them

sweeping in prostrate obeisance like weeping willows, shy and suppliant like prayers. Above them behold loosened fibrils, all flowery and incessantly athrill, of the purple quaking-grass, which pours down a flood of yellowy anthers ; snowy pyramids of the meadow and pond grasses, the green hair of the barren bent-grass, the ruffled plumes of that wild grass known as wind's-eye, violet-tinted as the hopes that crown our early dreams, standing out against the flaxen-grey background where the light radiates all about these flowering herbs. But higher still are a few Bengal roses scattered among the wild fringes of the daucus, the tufts of the toad-flax, the plumpy wand of the meadowsweet, the umbels of the wild chervil, the fair locks of the clematis in seed, the tiny cressets of the milk-white stitchwort, the clusters of the milfoil, the diffuse stems of the fumitory with its pink and black flowers, the tangled twigs of the honeysuckle ; in short all that these simple beings have of the utmost wildness and dishevelling, of flames and of triple darts, of ribbed leaves or of dentate ones, or of stems twisted about like vague desires entwined in the depth of the soul. From the heart of that over-brimming torrent of love

there surges a magnificent double red poppy with its pods all ready to burst open, scattering the sparks of its fire above the starry jasmine, and towering over the ceaseless rain of pollen dust, a lovely mist which twinkles in the air, reflecting the daylight in a myriad shining particles. What woman intoxicated by the aphrodite-like redolence hidden in all this forage could fail to feel this luxury of yielding ideas, this white tenderness stirred by unbridled movements and this red desire of love which longs for a happiness denied in those onsets, a hundred times renewed, of a passion still unspent, indefatigable, and eternal ? Was not everything that can be offered up to God offered up to love in this poem of luminous flowers that wooed the heart with its unceasing melody, fondling its secret voluptuousness, its unspoken yearnings, its illusions that were kindled or waned out like gossamer threads on a warm night ? '

No doubt that is a very brilliant piece of composition. But still, it is the description of a handful of flowers. Now where is the wide-necked vase, the huge jar that could hold such a crowd, such a multitude of stems as compose it ? It is not a bouquet, it is a forest ; it is

not a bouquet, it is a Paradon.<sup>1</sup> Moreover (and partly for that reason, though for others as well), it cannot be seen ; it is terribly confused : between the margin of white tufts and the double red poppy (this being quite clear and of some value) it cannot be seen at all. You hear all about it. You hear a clatter of strange and unusual names (in the style of Victor Hugo) that tickle the ear ; but that is not what is wanted ; you want to see it. If you look closely into it you find some most singular things. For example, whom have ferns or oak leaves ever impressed as being prostrate, or like weeping willows, or humble prayers ? I should rather think the impression made is quite the contrary. ‘Violet-tinted as the hopes that crown our early dreams,’ though rather affected, seems to me quite right ; but in what he enumerates—read it again—where does that flaxen-grey background come in, that background against which the bent-grass stands out, and how can light, if it exist at all, irradiate it instead of softening ? I defy a painter with his brush. ‘Stems twisted about like vague desires entwined in the depth of the soul’ is, in my opinion, excellent ; but

<sup>1</sup> Paradon = a paradise of flowers. Cf. Daudet’s *Tartarin*.—Tr.

above flowers gathered up into a posy and standing still, and far from the breeze, pollen does not hover at all ; and I know not how it comes about that gossamer threads take fire and die out in turn on a warm night. The effect as a whole is chaotic, and half of it is wrong.

It is well worthy of attention, as it is one of the few cases in which Balzac (who as a rule writes all the worse whenever he makes an effort to write well) did not fail, all things considered, in spite of his taking pains ; but it deserves only guarded approval.

And notice how infectious is impropriety of style ; for Taine, who admired this passage, says that in reading it ' all the voluptuousness of summer penetrates the senses and the heart like a tumultuous swarm of motley butterflies,' when the swarm of butterflies is never tumultuous (even laying aside the suggestion of noise which the word conveys), and it always conveys something of soft and harmonious sinuosity. At bottom this page of Balzac, which is famous, and after all deserves to be so, is not wholly balderdash, though it has a good deal of it.

And nearly the whole of *le Lys dans la Vallée* likewise is a prodigy of bombast and

bathos, just as though written by some one who was straining himself to write as badly as possible. And the worst of it is that its badness is so obviously the outcome of high-flown style. This is how he starts out when he wants to speak with the tongue of Chateaubriand : ‘ To what talent nourished on tears shall we some day owe the most touching elegy, the drawing of torments borne in silence by souls whose roots, still tender, strike only against hard stones in the domestic soil, whose first shy buds are torn off by malignant hands, whose flowers are nipped by the frost just as they are about to unfold ? What poet will render for us articulate the sufferings of a child whose lips suck at a bitter breast, and whose smiles wither in the scorching glances of a stern eye. . . . ’ And throughout the whole book, just as though he were busied with the painting of religious souls, there is a profusion of biblical metaphors, of ‘ perfumes of Magdalen,’ of ‘ stars of the Magi,’ of ‘ Isaiah’s burning coal,’ which often borders on the burlesque. I know of two parodies of this turgid and chilly emphatic style, and they are the travel impressions of the avalanche man in Töpffer’s *Mont Saint-Bernard*, and the con-

versation of Rodolphe and Mme. Bovary during the solemnity of the agricultural board meeting. Both are inferior to their model.

He himself needed a model in order to write properly, but a model in keeping with his nature which was neither fine nor distinguished. He was very apt at copying (as I have already pointed out) the language of common people, and he imitated happily enough, though uneasily, the style of the jolly story-tellers of the sixteenth century. Though I am well aware of how much a philological student of that period could point out as to the *à peu près* in the *Contes drolatiques*, still the general effect of the whole is good, and as far as that goes, the patchwork imitation is most successful. The vulgar scenes and the *Contes drolatiques* are the only parts of his work which, after all reckoning has been made, are really worth much considered as style.

He said : 'There are only Victor Hugo, Gautier, and myself who know the language thoroughly.' Unfortunately there is one name too many in the list, for even as regards material accuracy Balzac is often at fault. It is not that he does not know a great deal of the language, and that of the best. Notice his

excellent archaisms. He can say ‘ arraisonner quelqu’un ’; he can say ‘ emboîter quelqu’un ’ (to hoodwink him by coaxing); he can say ‘ se battre de la chape à l’évêque ’ (to fight for something which is not yours); and I might multiply these examples; but, side by side with all this, he falls into the most commonplace and vulgar blunders.

He can say ‘ un petit office,’ and, to be sure, it is what ought to be said; but still it is a good many hundred years since anybody said it. He can say ‘ Il n’est pas de femme qui . . . ne conçoive une de ces réflexions.’ Or again, ‘ En accordant à un étranger le droit d’entrer dans le sanctuaire du ménage, n’est-ce pas se mettre à sa merci ? ’ is a sentence of which the syntax is absolutely impossible. ‘ Elle conduisait [for *gouvernait*, but that may pass] les ouvriers et jouissait ainsi dans l’atelier d’une espèce de suprématie qui *la sortait* un peu de la classe des grisettes.’—‘ M. Portel ceint d’un tablier de préparateur, une cornue à la main, examinait un produit chimique tout en *rejetant l’œil* sur sa boutique. . . .’—‘ L’imprimeur jugea sans doute ces graves paroles nécessaires, l’influence de Mme. de Bargeton ne l’épouvantant pas moins que la funeste mobilité de carac-

tère qui pouvait *tout aussi bien* jeter Lucien dans une mauvaise *comme* dans une bonne voie.'—'. . . Car alors nous ne nous quitterons pas aujourd'hui, répondit-il avec la finesse du prêtre qui voit *sa malice réussie*.'—'Ce nouvel Art d'aimer consomme énormément de paroles évangéliques à l'œuvre du Diable.'—'Sous la Restoration la noblesse s'est toujours souvenue d'avoir été battue, aussi, mettant à part deux ou trois exceptions, est-elle devenue économe. . . .' Do you understand this nobility that puts aside two or three exceptions ? He means to say, 'So, apart from some exceptions. . . .'—'Une vraie courtisane . . . porte dans la franchise de sa situation un avertissement aussi lumineux que la lanterne rouge de la prostitution ou que les quinquets des trente et quarante. Un homme sait alors qu'il *s'en va* là de sa ruine,' and so on. I have picked out these instances of material inaccuracy from three books only.

This style singularly astonished and seemed to upset Sainte-Beuve. In his memorial article, dated 2nd September 1850 (and let us not forget that it is the sort of article in which the tendency is to judge as favourably as may be, nor that Sainte-Beuve did his best to judge

fairly and without spite), he says : ' What I like in his style, in its delicate parts, is its *efflorescence* (I do not know where to find a better word), by which he gives everything the feeling of life, and sets the very page ahrill. But I cannot welcome, under the cloak of physiology, the continual abuse of this quality, this style so often *chatouilleux* and melting, enervated, roseate, and shot through with every tint, this style of delicious and quite Asiatic corruption, as our masters used to say, more broken in places and more flabby than the body of an antique mummer.<sup>1</sup> Does not Petronius, amidst the scenes which he describes, regret somewhere or other what he

<sup>1</sup> I crave the reader's pardon, though it will hardly be accorded me, but I cannot forbear remarking in smaller type, that is to say half aloud, how often the best of the nineteenth-century stylists indulge in haphazard expressions that are ambiguous and often either of questionable fitness or wholly out of place. An *efflorescence* is ring-worm, or a rudimentary and imperfect blossoming, and it is just the contrary of what Balzac meant to say, and he ought to have said *floraison*. Balzac with his *efflorescence* gives everything the feeling of life? Well, no! Either he gives everything feeling or he gives everything life, or he gives everything feeling and life; but he cannot give them the feeling of life, for you give things either feeling or life; but you can only give the feeling of life to persons. *Chatouilleux* means what is sensitive to tickling, and we cannot conceive a style of such susceptibility, and *chatouillant* was the right word. I admit that, save for these three slips, the whole passage is that of a master-hand.

calls *oratio pudica*, the bashful style, which does not yield to the fluidity of every gesture ?' This portrait of Balzac's style, for a portrait it is, is very curious, and it is difficult to recognise in that too supple mummer the square-built weight of Balzac and his style, and (as I believe Brunetière has remarked) this very pretty description would more fitly describe the style of Sainte-Beuve himself. But, all things considered, it is praise, grudging praise, but still praise, since the impression we get from it is that Balzac has a style similar to that of Jean Jacques Rousseau in his romantic or confidential works ; it is, in short, praise.

But, as you expect with Sainte-Beuve, who proceeds by continual touching and retouching, taking back with one hand what the other has just granted, six pages later he retraces his steps, and coming back to the question of style, as though he had said nothing about it, he says : ' As for the style, it is fine, subtle, fluent, picturesque, without the least analogy with tradition. [Quite right.] I have sometimes wondered what effect one of M. de Balzac's books would produce on an honest mind, hitherto nourished on *good French prose in all its frugality*, on a mind such as exists no longer, trained up on

readings from Nicole and Bourdaloue,<sup>1</sup> on that simple, steady, and scrupulous style *which goes far*, as La Bruyère puts it. Such a mind would feel giddy for a whole month afterwards.' I do not know, but it seems to me that M. Sainte-Beuve actually here throws out a straight hint that M. de Balzac wrote balderdash. And later on (*Causeries du Lundi* (vol. iv.), *Histoire de la Restauration*), returning once more, most furtively, to this topic, see how Sainte-Beuve, under pretence of talking about Lamartine's style, points out that Balzac's is compact of over-strained, exaggerated, and incoherent metaphors. 'M. de Lamartine yielded rather too much to his new prose style, in which Balzac goes for a great deal more than Tacitus. "The Empire had grown old before its time : satisfied ambition, satiated pride, the delights of the palate, exquisite feeding, soft beds, young wives, indulgent mistresses, late hours, sleepless nights divided between work and festivity, constant riding on horseback which allowed him to put on flesh, [all this for Tacitus] had thickened his limbs and dulled his senses. . . . His strong and bony chin bore well the base of

<sup>1</sup> Seventeenth-century moralists, who were foremost as writers of the classical school.—TR.

his features. His nose was but a thin and transparent line. . . . His look was searching, wavering like a restless flame, like care. *His forehead seemed to have grown broader beneath the bareness of his long, flat, black hair, half fallen under the moisture of sustained thought* [here Tacitus has given way to Balzac] ; *it seemed as if his head, by nature small, had grown larger in order to let roll more freely between his temples the cog-wheels and the combinations of a soul whose every thought was a whole empire. The chart of the globe seemed to be incrusted on the world-map of that head.*''' How can I trust such a portrait when I see to what an extent the rhetorician, the writer, is carried away by his love of metaphor and redundancy ? Thus does Sainte-Beuve indirectly hold up Balzac's style as an example of what should be avoided.

The reader whom Sainte-Beuve imagined even while asserting that he no longer existed, was actually alive and close to him ; he was called Nisard,<sup>1</sup> and wrote only two lines on Balzac, of which one is more than half wrong, and the other wholly right. 'I should less fear a return of vogue for Balzac's good novels were

<sup>1</sup> Désiré Nisard (1806-88) wrote a famous *Histoire de la Littérature française*, and for long withstood the romantics.—TR.

*their manners less anecdotic and their language more natural.' Nisard is not at all wrong in esteeming that the manners of Balzac's works are ' anecdotic,' that is to say, exceptional, and fit only to be regarded as something *freakish*. Only he forgets the better Balzac, who created *typical characters*, who, as I trust I have shown, is precisely a great classic, and has to a point the same turn of mind as Molière and La Bruyère and Bourdaloue. As for his judgment on his style it is quite right, and what Balzac lacked most was just naturalness. I hold to what I have already said, that, save for the *pasticcio* of the *Contes drolatiques*, the portraits, the conversations between vulgar people, and a few parts where he forgot to be careful about his writing, and in which he was happy—except for these, and that means nearly all along, Balzac was a very bad writer. I am hardly affected by that consideration of Brûnitière's (which he seems to have set much store by, since he applies it to Molière as well as to Balzac), that to write badly is a ' condition for the representation of life.' It seems to me that if you be a playwright or a novelist, you must make your characters talk according to their origins and their condition in life ; but when*

you yourself talk, or when you set characters of the middle class or of middling education talking, it seems to me that your duty of representing life does not oblige you to write 'une âme généreuse a des régals peu chers,' nor 'de quoique l'on vous somme,' nor 'consciemment' in place of 'conscient,' nor yet again 'sortir son chien.'

## VIII

## BALZAC AFTER HIS DEATH

APART from Montaigne, Voltaire, and Rousseau, I know of no other French writer who has had such a moral and literary influence as that of Balzac. To begin with the former, it is known that already during his lifetime, in Russia, at Venice, and doubtlessly elsewhere as well in polite circles, there were groups of men and women who played the game, which was unfortunately perhaps something more than a mere game, of performing in reality Balzac's world of man, sharing among themselves the parts of Rubempré, Rastignac, Lousteau, Bianchon, Manfrigueuse, Beauséant, Langeais, and perhaps Vautrin. The thing had never been seen since *l'Astrée*,<sup>1</sup> though it has certainly been of frequent occurrence, though not signal enough for literary history to have handed it down to us.

<sup>1</sup> A novel by the celebrated *précieuse* Madeleine Scudéry (1607-1701).—TR.

But that is a mere episode. Since Balzac's death it has needed but a pair of eyes to see that life *as Balzac described it*—that is to say, the rage to rise to dignities and wealth, *l'arrivisme* as it has been called—has become, now more than ever before, the normal way of life for a very great number of French people, and their normal way of feeling and thinking. By the rapid fortunes which he made some of his unscrupulous characters achieve, and above all, or at least quite as much, by the artistic beauty which he bestowed on them, Balzac very probably (for in such a case positive assertion is not possible), increased the number of such men and women. He increased the number not exactly of scoundrels, but of the kind of folk of whom it may be said, as honest Michel Chrestien says to Rubempré, 'There is in you a devilish spirit which justifies in your own eyes whatever is most contrary to our principles: instead of being a sophist in ideas you will be a sophist in action.' The expression is of Balzac's own coining, and it is excellent: he increased the number of sophists in action; and if any one should tell me that it is hardly necessary to fight shy of using the word scoundrel in order to go hunting after another which

implies quite as much, if not more, in describing the conscious rogue who compounds with his conscience, I must admit that I have little to say in defence. So incomparably is example stronger than precept, that of the two men, Stendhal, the cynic, and Balzac, who is quite other than cynical both in his own person and in his own speech, but who brings on the scene and in full light the most cynical characters, surrounds them with a certain halo, and gives them a certain prestige, it is certainly the moralising Balzac who was the more demoralising.

Edmond About, who moreover wrote to Flaubert concerning *Madame Bovary*, 'I thought I was reading a novel by Balzac, better written, more passionate, cleaner, and freer from those two sickening odours which sometimes take hold of me in the middle of the writings of the Touraine man, the odour of a sink and the odour of the sacristy'—Edmond About well characterised this sort of influence in one of his novels. Two young people are busy chatting, he a charming young man and she a delightful young lady; the young man believes the young lady to be worth a million of money, and the young lady believes him to be both rich and titled, each

being the dupe of the other. 'And do you like *Hermann and Dorothea*?' said the young man. 'Oh! an insipid idyll! Oh, no! Have you read Balzac? He's the man for me.' It is two young Balzacians who, without suspecting it, are thus talking together.

And I need not say, for *omnia sana sanis*, that the influence of Balzac over a man may happen to be excellent. I once knew a pure hero of Balzac's, alive and breathing, who was neither a Russian nor a Venetian.<sup>1</sup> When he was studying rhetoric, and far from the top of his class, he used to say to his master when questioned by him as to his vocation, 'I will be editor-in-chief of the *Revue des Deux Mondes* and a professor at the Collège de France.' He was a professor in schools that train lads for their *baccalaureat*; he was editor of the *Revue des Deux Mondes* at twenty-five; he became its director; he became the foremost literary critic of France; he became a professor at the École Normale, where he had failed to enter when twenty years old; he became a great orator, a kind of apostle (he became a father-confessor of minds and consciences); he used to work fourteen hours a day (and he really

<sup>1</sup> This is an allusion to Taine.—TR.

did so, and not merely according to a formula); and he was the most honest of men and the kindest, and his last book was in praise of Balzac, whom he had always admired. He was a Balzacian, but he had derived from Balzac only the lesson of determination, of tenacity, of unalterable self-confidence, of stubborn hard work, and of *arrivisme* by any means, save such as were shameful. That kind of Balzacism must exist, since I met with a revered example of it; only I think it must be exceptional.

His literary influence was, as near as such a thing may be reckoned, quite as important as his moral influence. This man who fundamentally (though what is fundamentally?) was a romantic, who was at least half romantic and half realist, who according to many was more of a romantic than a realist, created realism, or rather made it live again, and buried romanticism for fifty years. He said to men of letters, by the example given in the best part of his work, 'Above all things, use your eyes well; nothing in the world has so great a value as the thing seen.' Truth to tell, he was helped by the force of circumstances, by the fact that romanticism had lasted for half a century, and that something else therefore was

due to arrive. It is a law in literature, in fact the only one of which I am quite sure, that after a period of sensibility and imagination comes a period of observation, and that a period of observation is followed by one of imagination and sensibility. But still, in the overtaking of an outworn *genre*, what is the real use of those who are introducing the new one ? To set everything loose with a vigorous blow ; to steer literature on to a road where it would have gone by itself, though hesitating and slow ; to prevent—and this is an inestimable boon—the style which is going out of fashion from having, for lack of opponents of high standing, a poor and lamentable retinue, a train of copyists who work by rule of thumb, without either originality or merit. Had La Chaussée<sup>1</sup> had any genius at all, he would have prevented people from writing right down to 1800, and even on to 1820, tragedies like those of Crébillon.<sup>2</sup> Men of genius who introduce a new style spare the old one the shame of dying by slow dilution ; they do it the service of allowing it to die in the fulness of its beauty.

<sup>1</sup> Pierre-Claude Nivelle de la Chaussée (1692-1754) the first to exploit the comedy of tears.—TR.

<sup>2</sup> Prosper Crébillon (1674-1762), a playwright who specialised in horror.—TR.

That is just what Balzac did for romanticism, which after all he adored. In spite of a very great deal that is freakish and improbable, he was greatly devoted to truth, and had for it one of those passions which may indulge an occasional infidelity, since even that revives them ; and thus it came about that he was, unconsciously and half involuntarily, the restorer of realism to French literature. Good and bad, true and false, he founded it all alike somewhat at random ; but still the fact remains that he founded it, and it cannot be denied that it was high time. He owed his great success perhaps rather more to what was bad in that novelty than to what was good in it. We may own before foreigners, since they are well aware of it, that there are not very many of us in France who are fond of stark realism, of a passionless and unsystematic description of mankind surprised in all the complicated and trivial details of his moral life. But we have a shameful hankering for the literature of brutality. We are fond of violence, daring, and coarseness in our writers, just because we are the most forbearing of men, and we delight in reading tales of stormy passion because we are accustomed to placid ones.

And our authors, who know us, play on this weakness for their own profit ; though it is but fair to add that we grant the writers who do so but little enduring success. If that of Balzac lasted longer and may be considered as permanent, it is because a considerable part of his work contains, as we have already seen well enough, earnest, conscientious, and profound realism, and because he was the first, in face of the still triumphant romantic literature, to give vigorous characteristics to the new or renewed art.

For both the good and the evil part of a writer's influence and its effect on posterity must be taken into account. A writer has indeed an influence on posterity, a far-reaching and general influence, a popular influence through what is worst in him ; and you must not cry out, 'There will be a *but*.' Lucretius owes the fact of his being unknown save to a handful of scholars to the fact that he spoke the worst ill of the religious feelings ; Rabelais owes his popularity to his being filthy ; Montaigne his to his being sceptical ; neither Ronsard nor Malherbe enjoys any ; Molière owes it to his being anti-clerical and sometimes coarse ; Racine has none, nor has

Montesquieu ; Voltaire owes it to his having been anti-religious ; Rousseau to what is anti-social in *le Contrat social*, or voluptuous and shameful in *les Confessions*. Glory too is founded on folly, and fools being in a majority, I should like to know how it could be otherwise.

Balzac pleased people, even after his death, by all those vulgarities, trivialities, and brutalities with which we have already reproached him. He pleased by his bad style, most readers being unable to stand the style of a Mérimée or a Gautier, being as it were put out of countenance by it, while they are not in the least bewildered by that of a Stendhal or a Balzac, which is their very own. On this point Sainte-Beuve remarks : ' Balzac, whom I do not pretend to belittle on the ground of the manners of his day [frightful style, but let that pass], and of certain manners in particular, of which he understands everything and has a masterly grip, nevertheless gets carried away and continually oversteps the limits of good taste ; he gets intoxicated on the very wine that he himself pours out, and loses his self-control ; the fumes get into his head and he gets bemused ; he is altogether an accomplice and a fellow-toper in what he offers us and in

what he depicts. *It is a great advantage, I know, for any one who wants to pass for a man of genius with vulgar people altogether to lack good sense in practical life and the management of their talent.* Balzac enjoyed that advantage. . . . Will you consider, in passing, a small example of this? I had, in an article, as I have done in this book, pointed out the *Hein?* which Balzac puts into the mouth of a great lady, though indeed I should have pointed it out all the same had he put it into the mouth of a well-bred, middle-class young lady instead. A university professor made cruel fun of me on this account. The *Hein?* seemed to him quite natural, and maybe he would have recognised the great lady in society from it; and no doubt, if any lady avoided using it, it would have seemed to him to be the mere primness of affectation. The vulgar, coarse, and brutal expressions of Balzac, in matter as in manner, had a great deal to do with his popularity.

*But*, if it be true that writers win success through their faults, they win it through them only on condition that they accompany great qualities. If Lucretius, Molière, Voltaire, and M. Anatole France had nothing better to give us than their horror of religion; if Montaigne

had nothing but his scepticism, and Rousseau no more than his political radicalism and erotic temperament, they would be utterly unknown. Qualities impose on readers, and failings hold them; qualities make people admire a writer, and failings make them love him; qualities inspire veneration, and defects establish and maintain intimacy. Now Balzac, perhaps more than any of those whom I have just mentioned, had just the genius necessary to impose itself, in good earnest, on connoisseurs, rather vaguely upon the general reader; while he has just enough faults to make himself beloved by the mob: and that is how glory is founded, and I would say, if I may, how is *cast* that glory that is always of Corinthian metal; to which must be added in fairness: *nec licet omnibus adire Corinthum.*

Balzac's influence was almost immediate, that is to say from about 1850 onward. He had immediate successors even while he was still living, such as the highly estimable Charles de Bernard, whose masterpiece was out in 1838, or Champfleury, who reached notoriety about 1855. This simple-hearted man in love with poetry, as Baudelaire depicts him—and the portrait may be true enough in substance—

does not deserve the contempt that Brûtière shows for him. From Balzac he took neither the great nor the trivial nor the base; he took only what was minute. Narrow in outlook, but very clear-sighted, utterly devoid of imagination, but a slow and diligent observer, he described minutely and accurately the hobbies, the mechanical gestures, the *tics*, ever so significant, which reveal commonplace minds. He might have modelled Poiret and Mlle. Michonneau, and was almost capable of chiselling the features of Charles Bovary. He helped Balzac a great deal by introducing him, so to say, in his lesser aspects. He gave entry to the Balzac mansion by a back door.

Duranty (who produced nothing or almost nothing), just before the appearance of Flaubert, whom by the way he did not understand, founded his review *Le Réalisme*, and if he be not the inventor of the word, he most certainly is the man who launched it on to the great current of conversation, critical study, and the language.

About the same time Hippolyte Taine published that famous article which, if I may say so, allowed university people, and the very considerable world that gravitates round them,

to admire Balzac. Brunetière puts it very well: 'In France, for the last hundred years, the adoption of a writer by university critics is as a rule his consecration, and, in any case, it is that which puts him in a fair way of becoming a classic.' And that may be readily understood; university critics, from prudence and circumspection—I will not say for other reasons—being always a generation behind the times, that is to say, some twenty-five or thirty years, consequently adopt none but writers who are well on in years. Be that as it may, Taine was both the most brilliant and the most serious of all the students of the *École Normale* in 1848. He was brought up, speaking from the literary point of view alone, by that strange man Jacquinet, thoroughly classical, quite insensible to the prestige of romanticism, but who at the same time, being very intelligent, was wonderful in recognising what was classical in the writers of his own time, and who revealed Stendhal and Balzac to his pupils as being classics at bottom, just as Racine, Molière, and *La Bruyère* were—that is to say, as careful observers of the wheel-work of the human machine. Taine's article, with which I do not wholly agree, as may have been easily noticed,

was premeditated, systematic, and lyrical ; he likened social history to natural history, which is at once an apology and (much against the author's will) a half condemnation of Balzac ; he mustered into line, in a magisterial way, the leading characters, the monsters of Balzac, deliberately leaving on one side those characters in the description of whom he failed, and finally claimed for his author the right of writing ill under the pretence that the way of writing must vary according to the readers whom you are addressing just as much as according to the age, and proved that Balzac wrote as well as could be. And, in short, after having quoted the description of the feast in *le Lys dans la Vallée*, concluded as follows : 'Whatever may have been said or done, it is obvious that such a man knew his mother tongue, and knew it as well as any one ; only he plied it in his own style.' I would add : and without style.

That article, wonderfully fine after all, ample, wide in scope, and brilliant, was just the thing to spur admiration for Balzac ; he was certainly made to be relished by the most delicate taste, but it was meant, above all, for the crowd, for it was all quite plainly set forth, and tended entirely to the glorification of

Balzac. Sainte-Beuve's article, much truer precisely because truth exists in fine shades, was written with an eye on the public at large, so that they should wonder whether Balzac had genius, whether he was genuine, whether he wrote well, and how much he had of genius and to what extent he was genuine, and to what extent he was really a good writer. It was a bad article of strife and of conquest. It is true that Sainte-Beuve thought neither of striving nor of conquering, and merely took for his motto 'The truth alone.'

It is likely enough that Balzac at least helped to temper and amend George Sand, and was for something in her breaking away from the literature of pure imagination and in her return to the simple and natural, which was indeed no more than a return to her natural self. George Sand, who set out on the full tide of romanticism by saying, 'They make monsters, let us make monsters too,' must have been brought (amongst other motives), through Balzac's ascendancy over her, that Balzac whom she personally liked, to observing, if not patiently, at least carefully, the things about her, the peasantry, the middle-class people, the lesser independent gentlemen, the

artists ; and it was while working in that new vein that she brought out those amiable books of her third manner, quite true, mark you, in spite of their romantic aspect, and these are, I think, decidedly the ones that posterity will most cherish among all that came from her hand.

And mark well that up to 1848 George Sand was above all an ideologist, extremely in love with abstract ideas, though she often understood nothing of them ; and from 1848 onward she set herself (except in her polemical novel *Mademoiselle de la Quintinie*) only to paint such characters as had some basis in reality, *stylisés* in their shaping and made to follow the evolutions of sentiment. This was a transformation which George Sand herself very surely brought about, and yet there is nothing hazardous in attributing it at least in part to the influence of her great rival and friend.

As regards the stage, Balzac's influence was no less important, even granting that it was not still more so. Augier and Dumas succeeded Scribe, and it will be agreed that both were very probably led by Balzac's example, and above all by his success, to pour into their

dramatic work a greater amount of realism than the stage had ever known since Molière ; and most certainly, with the first appearances of Augier and the younger Dumas, people might have said :

And now we must no longer stray  
From Nature's path one step away—

as La Fontaine did when Molière burst upon the world.

Augier, while observing on his own account, and very well too, borrowed from Balzac his overbearingly vain *bourgeois*, and no doubt old Poirier passed from Balzac to Augier through Jules Sandeau, himself a pupil of Balzac's ; but it seems difficult not to recognise in him old Crevel, just as Maître Guérin has an obvious likeness to Baron Hulot ; he borrowed from him his courtesans and his hatred (which I have no thought of blaming) of courtesans ; he borrowed from him his journalists and his aversion (which I am not sufficiently disinterested to praise) for journalists. His other hatred, that for clericals, does not at all link him with Balzac, but rather with Eugène Sue ; but, all things considered, he derives from Balzac more than from any one else.

The younger Dumas confined himself almost entirely to the study of love passions because it was his special bent, and because it is the surest way to the heart. But even *la Dame aux Camélias* herself derives to some extent from *Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes*, while on the other hand *la Question d'Argent* is just like the stage version of a novel by Balzac, with more *mots*, traits, and wit than Balzac could have brought out; but that, after all, is a secondary matter.

Finally came Flaubert, who as a creative genius is very little below Balzac, and who, as artist and writer, is in my opinion incomparably his superior. Flaubert *filtered* Balzac. A romantic to his finger-tips, more so even than Balzac, and like him devoured by the demon of observation, his own being more patient, more obstinate, and more minute than Balzac's, he made up his mind (because he was the most 'conscious' and the most deliberate artist in the world) to satisfy both his passion as a romantic and his passion as a realist, but never to pour both these elements into the same novel. It was quite a discovery at the time that he wrote, for it meant the remembering of a law of literary art which had been

for long forgotten or ill understood. It meant remembering that the reader, unconsciously, though as imperiously as possible, at all times requires of a work, I do not say unity of tone, for that means monotony, but unity as regards the general impression, and that the mixing up of romantic art for instance with realistic art bewilders him, disconcerts him, and shocks him just as much as would an anachronism or the mixing up of different epochs.

Therein he is quite right, for just as there is an historical epoch proper to romanticism, so there is one proper to realism, and the author who mingles or entangles both in the same book behaves as though he made men of 1765 converse with men of 1830, as though Corneille should make Polyeucte converse with Panurge ; and the mingling of strict observation with unbridled imagination is like a confusion of dates.

Balzac too often behaved in this way, whilst Flaubert never did so. To the romantic that throbbed inside him he yielded *Salammbô* and *la Tentation de Saint Antoine* and *la Légende de Saint Jean l'Hospitalier* and *Hérodiade* ; to the realist in him, that was eager for slow and careful observation of his fellows and

even of himself—which is worth noticing—he yielded *Madame Bovary*, *l'Education sentimentale*, and *Un Cœur simple*. And that is what I call filtering Balzac, which does not at all account for Flaubert's genius, but merely accounts for his method and the nature of his connection with Balzac.

Moreover, as I think I have already pointed out, Flaubert filtered Balzac again inasmuch as he thought of Balzac's personal intrusions, his dissertations, digressions, and prologues, and saw how much they hindered his work and spoilt its effect, condemning them outright, and ruthlessly ousting them from any place in his own work. He who was teeming with ideas (confused, indeed, though it is not with that that we have now to deal), with feeling, with passion, with indignation, with anger, and with eloquence for expressing it all, firmly made up his mind never to put any of these things into a novel, not even into a novel of imagination, exoticism, and antiquity. It seems likely enough that it was his reading and study of Balzac's novels that inspired Flaubert with his whole doctrine of 'impersonal art,' that truly classical doctrine which was respected by Homer, by Pindar (though he was a lyrical

poet), by Virgil, by Lucan (not at all by Lucretius, for the good reason that he was didactic), by all the epic poets of the Middle Ages, by the poor epic poets of the seventeenth century, by Le Sage, by Marivaux, by Voltaire in his *Contes*, and indeed even by Scarron himself.

Flaubert is a more artistic Balzac, more scrupulous, more orderly, and more careful of proper arrangement, and an infinitely better writer. And yet, in spite of Frédéric Moreau, *Bovary*, Mme. *Bovary*, and Homais, he created fewer types, fewer characters endowed with enduring life, and consequently he cannot be put on the same level of admiration as his great forerunner.

After him came his pupils (who are just as much Balzac's as his), all those who called themselves 'naturalists,' using a very equivocal term and one very ill-made (since *naturist* would be the right one), a term which was invented only because 'realist' seemed worn out. With them are all those who made use of the 'experiment novels' (a term equally inapt, for we cannot make experiments on the manners and the characters of men, but merely observations), all of those in short who

prided themselves on having no other art than that of seizing the truth and setting it down.

Alphonse Daudet, the Goncourts, Emile Zola, and Maupassant are of Balzac's direct progeny, but they have every one of them their own originality and, as it were, their characteristic personal mark.

Alphonse Daudet, who is an excellent observer, answers well to the pretty definition of Nisard (which the latter applied to Balzac); he is the painter of 'anecdotic manners.' As often happens with Balzac, he makes a novel out of a bit of Parisian gossip, or an anecdote to the bottom of which he knows how to probe, and in which he sees clearly all that it implies. It is certainly an excellent way of setting about giving the likeness of life to your story—of life detailed and familiar which you almost imagine you have yourself known. But that hardly helps, though there is no reason why it should not do so, in the creation of types; it narrows the horizon a little, but it does not accustom you to *faire de l'humain*, as a literary man would say. That is to say, it in nowise helps you in the making of characters who are at once typical and full of individual life, and that is the supreme summit of art, and

a summit to which Balzac often attained. Daudet drew a few wonderful portraits, but he created no types. For capital, he had sensibility and a capacity for emotion (the Dickens part of him, as some one has said), and these two things Balzac was practically without, or he refused to capitulate to them.

The Goncourts went farther in that direction than Daudet himself, and they delighted not only in anecdotic manners, but also in exceptional manners and characters. Balzac did not leave that out either, for there is no territory which he left unsurveyed ; but with him the nearness of characters recognised at first sight by the reader as being true warrants and renders genuine, if I may say so, the exceptional characters and psychological rarities which he introduces. In the Goncourts, all or nearly all the characters being exceptional, we hesitate to accept them as true, and it would really be necessary for the authors to give us their word of honour that they were so ; and then each of them would become as valuable as an historical document, a singularly interesting document of 'lesser history.' At bottom it is exactly that ; and it is obvious that the Goncourts had but little

imagination, and that they found their characters in the slice of real life which surrounded them ; and they must be read in that conviction. There remains the fact that this kind of art, most ingenious and scrupulous though it be, hardly satisfies at all our hankering to find in our novelists what we ourselves have seen still better seen by them, more strongly drawn, better set off, and more highly coloured, assuming vaster proportions and depths which we had but vaguely suspected.

There is no doubt that it was the reading of Balzac, and of Taine's article on him, as well as the other works of that critic that revealed to Émile Zola his literary vocation. In detesting Zola, Taine was quite as ungrateful as Chateaubriand when he detested romanticism. Taine had very rightly observed that Balzac treated the social world just as he might have done a zoological one, and wrote a natural history of humankind. Such was Émile Zola's art formula. He determined to look on men merely as animals, and human society as an animal one. It must be noted that this is not altogether wrong—it is a half-truth ; for animalism has indeed a huge share in all of us, and

Baron Hulot, Philippe Brideau, and Old Goriot, whom we feel to be so life-like, are nothing else than big super-animals. And that shows that very fine things may be done, with proper talent, working from this simple conception. But it is obvious that he who neither rises above it nor gets beyond it can achieve nothing more than 'the epic poem of human animalism,' as M. Lemaître has said. Zola, either from incapacity or purposely, forbade himself all psychology, and said proudly, 'I have no need of psychology.' And in so doing he showed himself very different from Balzac, who is oftentimes the most penetrating psychologist in the world.

And still he *did* resemble him. Like him deeply romantic (as he himself confessed), and like Flaubert in his striving to 'get rid of the romantic virus,' without ever succeeding ; like him in love, only still more so, with great ensembles, and able to set crowds in motion like the waves of a vast sea ; like him (though not more so) most eager to seize the external aspect of things, of a house, a street, a market-place, a corner of a town, a whole town, or a province, and succeeding rather well, in spite of a useless symbolism and sort of mytholo-

gism, in rendering them and making them impressive, he is still in my opinion the one successor among all the immediate followers of Balzac who most resembles the great master.

His faults, which are enormous, derive partly from Balzac, or can at least be considered as being due to his tradition ; his vulgarity, his triviality, his liking for dirtiness (since Boileau uses that word, why should it be forbidden me ?), his *sordisme* if you like that better, make us think rather of Restif de la Bretonne<sup>1</sup> than of Balzac no doubt ; still we cannot hide from ourselves the fact that these elements are to be found in Balzac, and perhaps oftener than we could wish. Zola was a *coarser* and a more vulgar Balzac, authorised, as it were, by what was gross and coarse in Balzac himself. No one perhaps ever had more than he the advantage which lack of fineness gives in appealing to the public at large, and it must be acknowledged that Balzac too enjoyed this precious privilege in considerable measure. An excellent man moreover—for we feel bound to say it when we have been treating him so ill, even though

<sup>1</sup> Restif de la Bretonne (1734-1806), the author of very unequal and licentious novels, apparently the outcome of his personal ill-living.—Tr.

it has no connection with the matter we are now dealing with—a man of generous feelings, in spite of his extraordinary irritability and pride ; a man who did credit to himself by his later works, however bad they may be ; a man of whom we may say that he began with fine books that were bad deeds, and ended with good deeds that were bad books.

Maupassant, a direct pupil of Flaubert, learnt from him that 'impersonal art' which he put into practice so strictly, even more strictly than Flaubert himself. He owes, after all, little enough to Balzac. He is impersonal ; he is no longer a romantic nor a 'low realist,' nor a creator of types ; he has neither Balzac's defects nor his outstanding qualities. Still the *frankness* of narrative, the robust shaping of exposition, the absence of all affectation in writing, the something calm and strong that makes an author seem like a natural power, is his in common with Balzac. The same fundamental pessimism, too, is to be found in both. The language and the style as well, though better than those of Balzac, or if you prefer, less unequal, remind you of him at his best, by their naturalness, their spontaneity, their genuineness, their lack of pose ; by the

fact that they give the impression that before setting about writing, and in order to do so, the author did not put himself in 'a literary frame of mind.' We know well enough that Balzac had too often just these defects, though I recognised too that he had often these same qualities in a high degree.

M. Bourget, though indisputably Balzac's inferior, as he would be himself the first not only to admit but to proclaim, is the contemporary novelist who most resembles him, whom he has evidently passionately read over and over again. To tell the truth, he has nothing of the romantic about him, he will have nothing to do with low realism, and I would even say that he abhors it. But (here is my opinion as to his defects) in spite of the examples and lessons set him by Flaubert, he deliberately turned his back on 'impersonal art' and relapsed on dissertations, prologues, and almost continuous commentary. He seems to be holding his characters by the hand, even suspending at times their actions, so that he may say to us: 'Just see what they are about; they think in this way or in that way or in that other way. And that is easily explicable, for it is quite natural for the human heart to. . . . Please

notice in short . . . ' And this commentary is much cleverer and much less out of place than in Balzac, and I do not think that he *ever* degenerates into mere digressions. But it is almost perpetual; it hinders action, takes from the reader the pleasure of himself making reflections which the author makes for him, irritates his pride, which thinks, ' I could easily explain these things for myself without his doing it for me so complacently,' and gives the work the hybrid character of a narrative mixed up with a series of lectures.

Another resemblance to Balzac, fortuitous perhaps, pertaining perhaps to something which may be common to both, is the fact that M. Bourget, like Balzac, has a very unequal style, excellent at times, as in the philosophical, psychological, and moral *formulæ*; at other times painful, obscure, difficult, and incorrect.

And like Balzac, as regards his merits, M. Bourget aims at creating types, and he often more than half succeeds, as in the type of a genuinely democratic professor imbued with the spirit of 1848 as with a religion; the type of the French aristocrat inwardly self-exiled, who banishes himself from the nation as from a foreign body; the type of the egoist, self-

centred and strengthened in his egoism by scientific doctrines and a scientific education wanting in ballast, etc.

M. Bourget is fond of the novel of ideas, and even of the problem novel, and herein he much resembles Balzac, and yet with a good deal of difference too, for Balzac *scatters* the ideas he treasures all through his novel, whilst M. Bourget *incorporates* them in his, makes of one of them the very soul of his work, and in such a way that thesis and action mingle, or rather fuse together, so that the novel from beginning to end moves onward both to its unravelling and to its conclusion.

Like Balzac, M. Bourget is very psychological, but with this difference, that Balzac is more of a moralist, an observer of manners than a psychologist, while M. Bourget, though he observes well, is more of a psychologist than a moralist, just as Stendhal was ; he delights somewhat less in studying and noting the diverse ways of men than—a character being given—in dogging, watching, spying, and probing into its secret details, and in all their delicate play, into the fine and subtle springs of action.

Add to this, what is less important, that M.

Bourget, like Balzac very often, though by no means invariably, is fond of slipping into his novel a dramatic scene, an intrigue, unexpected and pathetic incidents, a whole drama in short. Finally—and it is a claim than which none could be worthier—M. Bourget is the best, the most thorough-going pupil of Balzac's who has revealed himself since 1870, without being in the least an imitator.

The direct influence of Balzac is at an end. He is neither copied any longer, nor is his general turn of mind to be seen in the works produced since 1900. Contemporary novels remind us rather of George Sand, or Sandeau or Octave Feuillet than of him. People become classic ; they do not imitate the classics ; they do not even get their inspiration from them ; they are merely part of the mental development, which is, after all, a highly important thing ; but still there is not in 1912 (any more than there was in 1770) a school of Corneille, of Racine, or of Molière, nor is there any longer a school of Balzac. Balzac is henceforward, like all the great classics, like Chateaubriand, for instance, or Victor Hugo, according to whichever metaphor you choose, set above all schools like a quicken-

ing star, or beneath them all like a fertilising soil.

In order to fix Balzac's place in the nineteenth century, and to complete his characterisation, an attempt has been made to find out every one with whom he might possibly be compared, and thus it comes about that a very great critic has compared him to Sainte-Beuve, solely from the point of view, it is true, of *method*, considering that he studied men just in the same way as Balzac, quite unhampered by any *a priori* or metaphysics, like true naturalists. Even when reduced to this point of view, the parallel is quite baseless. Sainte-Beuve invented nothing, nor did he wish to. Balzac invents at least as much as he observes, and in my opinion a great deal more, a fact for which moreover I bear him no grudge. Sainte-Beuve knows of nothing but investigation, and wishes to know of nothing else ; Balzac trusts, and quite rightly, to his intuition, and follows it to such lengths indeed that it ceases to be, even for him, a safe guide ; Sainte-Beuve has no *a priori* whatever, and Balzac has an *a priori*, or (if you prefer the term) a general idea which dominates and overhangs observation, and that is the enormous *a priori*

due to his fundamental pessimism and essential misanthropy. There exists between Balzac and Sainte-Beuve absolutely no common bond, and there are no two natures which, not only from the point of view of taste and of tastes, but in everything else, could be more widely sundered.

Balzac can only be compared to some purpose, and to finish defining him to George Sand and Flaubert in his own century, and to Le Sage and La Bruyère in the rest of French literature. George Sand has far less than he the power of creating types, and the almost material proof is in the fact that though we say commonly, 'He is a Grandet all over, or a Goriot, or a Philippe Brideau,' we never say, 'He is a Villemer or a Merquem.' Hardly ever; though it must not be forgotten that people will say, 'Here is a Mauprat or a Lélia.' But George Sand had a better style than Balzac, as he himself recognised; and instead of following a rigid plan, she followed a pliant and a supple one, in itself a good way of achieving resemblance to real life; and she had grace, she possessed the *molle atque facetum* which Balzac was utterly without; and, finally, in truth of detail, in her subservient

and incidental characters, in the smooth current of ordinary everyday happenings, I cannot too often repeat how clearly this idealistic and imaginative woman saw everything, and had the genuine and simple sense—without bias, save towards indulgence—of reality, actual reality, which is a thing so far removed from 'realism.' Whatever may have been said about it, people will get nearer to the true history of average daily life in the nineteenth century when reading George Sand than when reading Balzac.

Flaubert, that unbridled romantic who had such matchless gifts as a realist, and who was therefore a thoroughly equipped artist; Flaubert, who dreamt only of oriental tales vast as the frescoes of a cathedral, streaming with colour and set with dazzling stones, who studied a Normandy village with the keen eye and the dissecting scalpel of his father; Flaubert, who, in spite of somewhat faulty *language*, had a wonderful gift for *style* and for all kinds of it;—Flaubert was better endowed than Balzac in truth, since he too knew how to create types, and since Mme. Bovary, M. Bovary, Homais, and Frédéric Moreau may be looked on as imperishable. But I must con-

fess too that fecundity is also a great gift, and that Flaubert, though he had to an incredible degree the faculty of creating types, and did indeed produce some astonishing ones, created after all very few, for he thrust into the living world no more than the four whom I have just mentioned ; for however devoutly and ingeniously the matter be put, I can hardly admit at the moment of writing that Mme. Arnoux and Salammbo are truly alive. The immense superiority of ' creating a world ' (to fall in for once with the exaggerated formulæ of ecstatic criticism) remains most indisputably with Balzac, though, as an artist, Flaubert must no doubt be preferred to him.

Le Sage wrote in the most beautiful classical language ever known and related things wonderfully well, better even than Voltaire, and that is saying a good deal. He wrote in a style that is neither too fast nor too slow, that neither drags nor leaps along, that is not monotonous, a style so perfectly obedient to the will, that we do not notice in reading him —what is the very acme of art—how well he tells a story, and become aware of it only in retrospect. As far as that is concerned, he is undoubtedly above Balzac. As a realist he

has an excellent sense of truth, of likelihood, of the average, that is neither overstrained in one direction nor in the other, of man as he really is, without any artistic deformation, without any refraction from the author's mind. And if it be true, in accordance with a definition which seems to me to be not of the worst, that art is truth seen through a temperament, it would seem as though Le Sage had no temperament at all ; and, therefore, Le Sage is the very model of what a realist should be. No one ever answered better than he to Stendhal's so happy and picturesque definition—‘ A novel is like a looking-glass dawdling along a road.’ He excelled in silhouettes : a thousand tiny people whom he comes across on his ‘ road ’ are set down in astounding perfection, and they are quite alive. But to him too, even more than to Flaubert, the gift of creating types was granted in but niggardly measure. He has only one such, Gil Blas himself, most extraordinary, imperishable, brimful of life, of several diverse lives which are not incoherent nor ill-assorted, but harmonious ; so completely does he seem, as he indeed is, the portrait of the civilised man, of the modern social man with his qualities and faults, in all his

complex truth and yet with a great simplicity in his main features. But he stands alone, although surrounded by the thousand interesting silhouettes just mentioned ; he is the only one that is a great portrait, the full-length canvas of a master.

La Bruyère, as a painter of manners and characters, is very great. Too much has been made of his abstract quality, of his being an inimitable artist who drew abstract pictures. He is often that, after the manner of his age ; but he is far from being always so. He 'made things live' much oftener than is believed. I have already cited in the course of these pages the rich man and the poor man ; there are plenty of others : Cydias, who besides being a portrait is recognised by the reader as being an actor on the stage or a man of letters in the world, the two things being in effect just the same ; there is Onuphre dressing himself, the way he walks, how he behaves in church, the air he puts on when he wants to get something out of somebody and wants to be asked instead, thus transforming the seeker for favour into its conferrer ; how he looks when he is running somebody down, and how, while smiling or sighing, he slanders and calumniates

by his very silence : I see all that ever so clearly, his face only being unknown to me ; but that is in truth because I have no need of it. In the same way I see Arsène, who from his lofty mind looks down on men, and who, seeing them so far off, is as it were frightened by their smallness ; and no physical feature could give me a better idea of his haughtiness, the turn of his head, his 'distant' look, his inward glance and a sort of sacred mystery in which his whole being is wrapped. And I might quote many another. A good many portraits of *La Bruyère* are living and concrete, some because they are deliberately and explicitly so, others because, though psychical portraits, they necessarily suggest, and without the reader contributing thereto, a physical effigy ; and these are not the least picturesque. The greatest painter of the men of his age, of the multitude of men of his age, is *La Bruyère*. We may add, if you will, that, as some one has said with good reason, Balzac is prophetic and painted men who were to live between 1850 and 1900. In the same way *La Bruyère* foretold the habits of life under the Regency, set forth how a pious man is one who, under an atheistic king, will turn a theist, guessed the

enormous importance that was to devolve on men of wealth and influence, and often proceeded by the most magisterial anticipations.

It is to *La Bruyère* that we must compare Balzac, setting aside the fact that they had both of them, in common with all men who watch things very closely, a heavy substratum of misanthropy. But I must admit that there is not in all *La Bruyère* a giant like *Grandet*, *Hulot*, or *Philippe Brideau*. Every time Balzac shows forth his great monsters we always feel bound to say to him, 'In spite of all your faults, and though it is very hard to put up with you, yet there was indeed inside you such a force of nature as must even have surprised itself a little.'

It seems as though Balzac had set out to prove that Buffon, when he said that well-written works were the only ones that could reach posterity, did not know what he was talking about. It seems as though he were determined to give him the lie. And it is true that Buffon is wrong; and it is true that posterity—and rightly so—welcomes with almost equal favour the great artist in language and the great inventor of ideas who has no style at all (Auguste Comte), and the great creator of

living things who has no style, or rather one that is generally tedious. Posterity prefers to welcome, it welcomes far more willingly, a great stylist; for posterity is artistic, let us be quite sure of that, and never forget it; but it does not drive away others *a priori*, and gives them as good lodging as they deserve. For the question is enrichment by beauty, by thought, by life, of the inheritance, the ever needy inheritance, of mankind.

And yet young men are requested not to get it into their heads, as they may very well feel encouraged to do, that it is enough to write badly in order to become a second Balzac.

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